

**THE WESLEYAN QUADRILATERAL:
RELOCATING THE CONVERSATION**

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Doctor of Philosophy**

**by
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Abstract

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The Wesleyan Quadrilateral is a fourfold construct comprised of Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience, that forms the basis for what is claimed to be an authentic expression of John Wesley's unique theological methodology. Conversations surrounding the Wesleyan Quadrilateral have been, by and large, limited to the realms of Wesleyan history and theology.

This dissertation proposes a twofold relocation of discussions surrounding the Wesleyan Quadrilateral: from the realms of Wesleyan history and theology into the realm of Christian education, and from the realm of geometry into the realm of conversation. The first relocation reveals a uniquely Wesleyan educational pedagogy. The second relocation replaces a static, geometrical metaphor with a dynamic, conversational metaphor that informs the transforming pedagogy implicit in the Wesleyan Quadrilateral.

Part 1 of this dissertation recounts the origin of the phrase Wesleyan Quadrilateral, surveys subsequent contemporary discussions, revisits Wesley's use of the four sources, and compares the constituent elements of the Quadrilateral as understood and practiced by its originators, its subsequent supporters and detractors, and Wesley. Part 2 of this dissertation develops the implications of the twofold relocation, revealing a conversational educational pedagogy that is uniquely Wesleyan.

The distinctive characteristics of a pedagogy rooted in Wesley's four-dimensional theological methodology are: an insistence upon the primacy of the Holy Spirit; a prayerful attentiveness to the Spirit's dynamic presence; a process whose ground and goal is a practical embodiment of Christian faith; a conversational interplay among Scripture, traditions, reason, and experience; an acknowledgment of and dependence upon the transformational work of the Holy Spirit; and an emphasis upon relevant implementation within the context of an accountable community. Out of these underlying characteristics emerges the following six-step Wesleyan pedagogy: prayer; clarification and formulation of the issue to be resolved; a series of bi-lateral conversations with the testimonies of experience, Scripture, traditions, and reason; a multi-lateral conversation among the four testimonies; an articulation of one's best current wisdom relating to the topic under discussion; and a plan for implementation and accountability.

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Part 1

The Wesleyan Quadrilateral—Then and Now

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The Wesleyan Quadrilateral has become an integral part of the self-understanding of American United Methodism. The Quadrilateral is a fourfold methodological construct for theological reflection and formulation that consists of Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. One of its more familiar formulations is found in The United Methodist Book of Discipline, 2004.

Wesley believed that the living core of the Christian faith was revealed in Scripture, illumined by tradition, vivified in personal experience, and confirmed by reason.¹

Twice during the candidacy process that culminates in ordination as either Deacon or Elder, candidates must state their understanding of The United Methodist Church's theological position that "Scripture, tradition, experience, and reason are sources and norms for belief and practice, but that the Bible is primary among them."² In spite of the significant role that the Quadrilateral has

¹ The United Methodist Church (U.S.), The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, 2004 (Nashville, TN: United Methodist Publishing House, 2004), 77.

² Book of Discipline, 2004, 234.

come to play in United Methodism in America, it has also become a catalyst for significant debate. Two of the principal issues in the debate have to do with the nature of Scripture's primacy and the degree to which Wesley's understanding of each of the Quadrilateral's four components is accurately represented in contemporary conversations.

The phrase "Wesleyan Quadrilateral" was coined by Albert Outler in an attempt to capture Wesley's preference for establishing standards of doctrine as opposed to developing an elaborate systematic theological system or imposing a juridical Confession of Faith. The phrase was never used by Wesley, nor has it ever appeared in any edition of The United Methodist Book of Discipline.

However, the four elements (or quadrants, as the concept is often graphically represented) of what has come to be known as the Wesleyan Quadrilateral—Scripture, tradition, experience, and reason—first appeared in the 1972 Discipline under the heading Doctrinal Guidelines in The United Methodist Church. Elsewhere in the 1972 Discipline the elements of the Quadrilateral were identified variously as theological sources, guidelines, and norms.³ Both the phrase, Wesleyan Quadrilateral, and the concept it represents have subsequently acquired a significant place in United Methodist identity.

The formulation of the Quadrilateral as a Wesleyan theological construct was precipitated by the 1968 merger of the Evangelical United Brethren Church

³ The United Methodist Church (U.S.), The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, 1972 (Nashville, TN: United Methodist Publishing House, 1972), 75-79.

and The Methodist Church.⁴ Representatives of both denominations were at loggerheads in their attempts to develop a consensus Confession of Faith which they could affirm and around which the congregations of both denominations would rally. The decision was made to retain both of the confessional statements of the predecessor denominations as “landmark documents” and to adopt the four guidelines as “norms for doctrinal formulation.”⁵ These four guidelines became what are now termed the Wesleyan Quadrilateral.

Each of the terms in the phrase “Wesleyan Quadrilateral” has contributed to subsequent ambiguity and controversy. The choice of the word “Wesleyan” rather than “Wesley’s” is an acknowledgment of the fact that neither the phrase itself nor the contemporary theological-methodological construct it represents was employed as such by John Wesley. At least one scholar questions whether even the more generic “Wesleyan” is still an overstatement of the presence and importance of the fourfold guidelines in Wesley.⁶

The term “Quadrilateral” has also been problematic in its own way. In regard to the number of sources, Scott J. Jones contends that there should be five, not the four which have come to make up the Quadrilateral. He contends

⁴ Albert C. Outler, “The Wesleyan Quadrilateral—In John Wesley,” in Doctrine and Theology in The United Methodist Church, ed. Thomas A. Langford (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 1991), 75-88.

⁵ Book of Discipline, 1972, 52, 78.

⁶ Ted A. Campbell, “The ‘Wesleyan Quadrilateral’: The Story of a Modern Methodist Myth,” in Doctrine and Theology in The United Methodist Church, ed. Thomas A. Langford (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 1991), 154-61.

that the “tradition” quadrant in the Quadrilateral should be subdivided into “Christian antiquity” and “Anglican tradition.”⁷ At least as troublesome as the term’s numerical implications is the way in which a literal geometrical understanding of the metaphor—as exemplified by the title of an article by Robert Tuttle, “The Wesleyan Quadrilateral—Not Equilateral,” seems to have taken on a life of its own.⁸ Among the difficulties generated by this geometrical understanding of the Quadrilateral has been a tendency to compartmentalize the four elements, as though they were not only distinguishable but also separable. Further, the implied separability of the four elements has led William J. Abraham, one of the more vocal contemporary critics of the phrase and its underlying concepts, to pit the content-oriented quadrants—Scripture and tradition—against the analysis-oriented quadrants—reason and experience.⁹ Elsewhere he cautions against a blurring of the distinction between theological content and theological methodology. He also laments what he perceives to be an abandonment of concern for historically orthodox theological content in favor

⁷ Scott J. Jones, John Wesley’s Conception and Use of Scripture (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 1995), 64.

⁸ Robert G. Tuttle, “The Wesleyan Quadrilateral—Not Equilateral,” in Basic United Methodist Beliefs, ed. James V. Heidinger II (Wilmore, KY: Bristol Books, 1986), 19-25.

⁹ William J. Abraham, Waking from Doctrinal Amnesia: The Healing of Doctrine in The United Methodist Church (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995), 62.

of the Quadrilateral's emphasis on theological methodology.¹⁰

The issue of the relative evidentiary "weight" assigned to the various quadrants has been the most public, and arguably the most contentious, of all of the issues surrounding the Quadrilateral. The Robert Tuttle article cited above, "The Wesleyan Quadrilateral—Not Equilateral," was but one expression of the concern that the primacy of Scripture not be compromised.¹¹ United Methodist theologian John Cobb weighed in on the other side of the issue arguing against a strengthened statement of scriptural primacy. Among his concerns was the danger of weakening the dynamic interdependency among the four elements of the Quadrilateral.¹²

Lastly is the concern which gives rise to this dissertation: Discussions of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral have, by and large, been limited to the fields of Wesleyan history and theology. A uniquely Wesleyan pedagogy for Christian education and faith formation that is implicit within the Quadrilateral has remained unexplored.

Premise of This Dissertation

The premise of this dissertation is that the relocation of the Wesleyan

¹⁰ William J. Abraham, "The Wesleyan Quadrilateral," in Wesleyan Theology Today, ed. Theodore H. Runyon (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 1985), 119-26.

¹¹ Tuttle, Wesleyan Quadrilateral.

¹² John B. Cobb, "I Say, 'Keep the Quadrilateral!'" Circuit Rider (May 1987): 4-6.

Quadrilateral into the field of Christian education reveals a uniquely Wesleyan pedagogy. Once the Quadrilateral has been relocated into the realm of Christian education, a second relocation moves the quadrilateral metaphor from the realm of geometry and into the realm of conversation. While the first relocation reveals a uniquely Wesleyan educational pedagogy for faith formation and discernment, the second relocation replaces a static, geometrical metaphor with a dynamic, conversational metaphor that informs the transforming pedagogy that the Wesleyan Quadrilateral inspires. These two relocations reveal in the four sources of the Quadrilateral a potential to function not only as a construct for guiding theological reflection and formulation, but also as a uniquely Wesleyan pedagogy for the practice of discernment and faith formation in the lives of Christian individuals and congregations.

This dissertation will develop its premise as follows. Following this introduction Chapter 2, "The Wesleyan Quadrilateral: It's Origin," will review the historical context that gave rise to the Quadrilateral. Chapter 3, "The Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Its Subsequent Development," will survey some of the issues raised by the authors who have been active in almost 40 years of discussions regarding the Quadrilateral. Chapter 4, "The Wesleyan Quadrilateral—In John Wesley," will examine the presence and use of the Quadrilateral's four sources in John Wesley's writings. Chapter 5, "The Wesleyan Quadrilateral—Then and Now," will provide a three-fold comparison of the constituent elements of the Quadrilateral as understood and practiced by its originators, its subsequent

supporters and detractors, and Wesley.

Building upon observations derived from Chapters 2-5, and especially from our understanding of Wesley's reliance upon and use of Scripture, tradition, experience, and reason, Chapter 6, "The Wesleyan Quadrilateral: New Understandings," will begin the process of relocating discussions surrounding the Quadrilateral from the realms of Wesleyan theology and history to the realm of Christian education. Chapter 7, "New Understandings: Further Explored," will continue the relocation with specific attention being given to new understandings of the Quadrilateral's four components and an exploration of pedagogical implications of the relocation.

The final chapter, Chapter 8, "A Wesleyan Pedagogy," reveals a uniquely Wesleyan conversational educational pedagogy that is characterized by an insistence upon the primacy of the Holy Spirit; a prayerful attentiveness to the Spirit's dynamic presence; a process whose ground and goal is a practical embodiment of Christian faith; a conversational interplay among Scripture, traditions, reason, and experience; an acknowledgment of and dependence upon the transformational work of the Holy Spirit; and an emphasis upon relevant implementation within the context of an accountable community. Out of these characteristics emerges a six-step Wesleyan pedagogy that begins with prayer, and moves through clarification and formulation of the issue to be resolved, a series of bi-lateral conversations with the testimonies of experience, Scripture, traditions, and reason, a multi-lateral conversation among the four

testimonies, an articulation of one's best current wisdom relating to the topic under discussion, concluding with a plan for implementation and accountability.

The Precipitating Situation

Since, over the past five years, I have become increasingly aware of the degree to which all theological reflection has been and is historically conditioned, especially my own, I thought it important, and hopefully helpful, to include a brief account of my spiritual pilgrimage—as I have come to understand it thus far.

My interest in the Wesleyan Quadrilateral has its roots in a four-year experience that occurred long before I had ever heard of either John Wesley or the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. In 1972 I became a member of a fundamentalist Christian congregation. In retrospect I came to realize that I had imbibed an approach to the Christian faith that was not only legalistic but also biblicistic. While almost thirty years have passed since my personal exodus from fundamentalism, the memories occasionally taunt me with a reminder not unlike the one on the rearview mirror of my car—"Objects are closer than they appear."

Where does the Wesleyan Quadrilateral fit in? In January of 1989, ten years after my ordination in a conservative evangelical (but not fundamentalistic) denomination, I decided to pursue having my Elder's Orders transferred to The United Methodist Church. I enrolled in a United Methodist Doctrine course that was a prerequisite to my completing that process. It was there that I first heard the phrase Wesleyan Quadrilateral. At the time I was unaware of the controversy

within United Methodism concerning the Quadrilateral. However, the notion that broad segments of the Christian tradition acknowledged that there were other sources of authority to be taken seriously was an invigorating breath of fresh air. That knowledge, plus a continuing interest in the conversations surrounding the Quadrilateral, continue to enrich and stimulate my thinking. My hope is that through this dissertation, United Methodist Christian educators and learners will embrace and implement the Quadrilateral as a resource for growth in the Christian faith and life.

CHAPTER 2

The Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Its Origin

This chapter will trace the development of the phrase “Wesleyan Quadrilateral” and its underlying concepts. It will begin with a brief discussion of the circumstances surrounding the 1968 General Conference of the Methodist Church, at which The Methodist Church and The Evangelical United Brethren Church united to form The United Methodist Church, and its decision to create The Theological Study Commission on Doctrine and Doctrinal Standards. It was in the 1970 Interim Report of this commission that the word “quadrilateral” first appeared. Next will be an examination of the Study Commission’s final report to the 1972 General Conference of The United Methodist Church, which was adopted and became Part II of the 1972 Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, “Doctrine and Doctrinal Statements and the General Rules.”¹

The 1968 Theological Study Commission

The United Methodist Church came into existence at its 1968 General Conference with the merger of The Methodist Church and the Evangelical United Brethren Church. One of the tasks of this uniting conference was the formation of a study commission to consider the problem represented by the presence of

¹ The United Methodist Church (U.S.), The Book Of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, 1972 (Nashville, TN: United Methodist Publishing House, 1972).

two separate statements of doctrinal standards, the “Articles of Religion” of the former Methodist Church and the “Confession of Faith” of the former Evangelical United Brethren Church.² The commission, chaired by professor Albert C. Outler, published an interim report in 1970 entitled The Theological Study Commission on Doctrine and Doctrinal Standards.³ The interim report was organized into four parts: (1) Suggested Questions for Study Groups (i.e., church members, pastors, church school leaders, local councils on ministries, the W.S.C.S. [Women’s Society of Christian Service], theological faculties and professors, and the council of bishops); (2) The Problem of Doctrine and Doctrinal Standards in The United Methodist Church; (3) An Inventory of Theological Problems (both perennial and contemporary); and (4) From Our Heritage to a New Quest: A Sermonic Experiment. The following discussion of this interim report will focus on Part 2, The Problem of Doctrine and Doctrinal Standards in The United Methodist Church.

² Thomas A. Langford, “Introduction,” in Doctrine and Theology in The United Methodist Church, ed. Thomas A. Langford (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 1991), 19.

³ The Study Commission’s executive committee included Albert C. Outler, chair; J. Bruce Behney, vice-chair; Robert Watts Thornburg, secretary; and Bishop Earl G. Hunt, Jr., liaison with the Council of Bishops. Other commission members were Clarence J. Borger, Mrs. Byrle Brown, Robert A. Chandler, Thomas F. Chilcote, John B. Cobb, Jr., Emerson S. Colaw, Arthur C. Core, Charles Creager, L. Harold DeWolf, Mrs. Louis H. Fields, Mrs. T. William Hall, Walter R. Hazzard, Joseph Kennedy, G. H. McConaughy, Frederick K. Miller, Miss Harriet Miller, John V. Moore, J. Robert Nelson, J. B. Nichols, J. G. Owen, Harvey Potthoff, Tom Reavley, John R. Sawyer, John T. Schwiebert, and Mack B. Stokes. Overseas delegates were J. R. Lance, Benjamin Asis, William Nausner, and Harrison Grigsby.

Part 2 not only set the historical stage for the report, but it also initiated the trajectory that brought about the continuing controversies regarding the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, namely: (1) the tolerance of theological diversity—within limits and (2) the source(s) of authority and methodology(ies) by which those limits should be determined. The first subsection of Part 2, *Our Rootage in the Christian Tradition*, asserted that

Wesley, Albright and Otterbein were all aware of the tragic failures of the fierce struggles of the 16th and 17th centuries between rival systems of “pure doctrine,” and had been persuaded that “dogmatism” as a method of theology was counter-productive. This led them to affirm the new spirit of theological pluralism, within the limits [emphasis in original] of an old, familiar distinction between the actual “essentials” and allowable variations in doctrinal interpretation.⁴

The report then quoted from Wesley’s “Character of a Methodist”—“As to all opinions which do not strike at the root of Christianity, we (Methodists) think and let think”⁵—and concluded that “Wesley argues earnestly for the co-existence of ‘peculiar opinions’ within the Christian community based on the catholic substance of the Christian faith.”⁶ The report contended that it was Wesley’s willingness to tolerate the “co-existence of ‘peculiar opinions’” that constituted his uniqueness, specifically, his willingness to synthesize themes that had

⁴ The United Methodist Church (U.S.), Theological Study Commission on Doctrine and Doctrinal Standards, An Interim Report to the General Conference (n.p., 1970), 5.

⁵ John Wesley, “The Character of a Methodist” (1742), in The Methodist Societies: History, Nature, and Design, vol. 9 of Works of John Wesley, ed. Rupert E. Davies, Bicentennial ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989), 34.

⁶ UMC, Interim Report, 6.

previously been treated as antithetical such as faith and good works, and divine sovereignty and human free will. The implication, according to the Interim Report, was that Wesley's synthesizing approach constituted his alternative to the rejection of counterproductive dogmatism as a theological methodology.

The interim report's embrace of Wesley's rejection of dogmatism as a theological methodology raises questions: If not by dogmatism, then by what authority was Wesley to distinguish between those doctrines which are essential or non-negotiable and those doctrinal variations which are allowable? By what authority does one challenge dogmatically established doctrinal norms? The questions take on added urgency when it is remembered that Wesley's fledgling revival movement was struggling to explain itself to potential adherents, to defend itself against established detractors, and to establish a sense of self-identity for its followers by delimiting its own understanding of theological "essentials."

The second subsection in Part 2, entitled The Wesleyan Concept of Authority, addresses these questions. It is in this subsection of the interim report that Scripture, tradition, experience, and reason⁷ (in that order) are referred to as

⁷ The notion of focusing on Wesley's sources of authority was in the air, if you will. The second chapter of Colin Williams' book, John Wesley's Theology Today (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1960), 23-38, entitled "Authority and Experience," speaks of Wesley's sources of authority under five subject headings—The Inspiration of Scripture, The Method of Biblical Inspiration, Tradition, Reason, and Experience.

a “quadrilateral of ‘standards’” (though not a Wesleyan quadrilateral).⁸

In this quadrilateral of “standards,” Scripture stands foremost without a rival. Tradition is the distillate of the formative experiences of the People of God in their wrestling with the problems of biblical inspiration. “Experience” (“the inner witness of the Spirit”) is the name for that vital transit from the objective focus of faith to its subjective center—from “dead faith” (correct belief) to “living faith” that justifies and saves. And reason is the referee of the terms in which all this is expressed. Any insight, therefore, that is a disclosure from Scripture, illumined by tradition, realized in experience and confirmed by reason is as fully authoritative as men may hope for in this life.⁹

Wesley’s theological approach is misunderstood, however, if it is portrayed only as a negative reaction against the tragic failures of dogmatism. Positively, Wesley’s appropriation of “the traditional Anglican triad”—i.e., Scripture, tradition, and reason—plus experience as a fourfold alternative to dogmatism is an embrace of his own modified version of the Lockean empiricism of his day. Unlike Locke, Wesley did not limit empiricism to the impressions that

⁸ UMC, Interim Report, 7-8. In a retrospective article written in 1985, “The Wesleyan Quadrilateral—In John Wesley,” in Wesleyan Theological Journal 20 (Spring 1985):7-18, Outler, who chaired the Theological Study Commission on Doctrine and Doctrinal Standards, provided an apologia for his role in the Commission’s work. Specifically, Outler was responding to questions regarding the historical accuracy of associating Wesley with the Quadrilateral by means of the adjective “Wesleyan.” In the context of that article Outler provides a helpful historical summary of the development of what he refers to as the Anglican triad of Scripture, tradition, and reason. He concludes that

It was Wesley’s special genius that he conceived of adding “experience” to the traditional Anglican triad, and thereby adding vitality without altering the substance. . . . With this “fourth dimension,” one might say, Wesley was trying to incorporate the notion of conversion [original emphasis] into the Anglican tradition—to make room in it for his own conversions and those of others.

⁹ UMC, Interim Report, 9.

the external world makes upon our five physical senses. For Wesley the physical senses were inadequate to mediate spiritual reality, and so he posited spiritual senses whose functions are

to provide access to the world of the Spirit. Using this notion Wesley developed a doctrine of religious experience directly parallel to the Lockean doctrine of sense experience. Spiritual senses operate in strict analogy to physical senses. . . [The] spiritual senses remain obscured, unused, atrophied . . . until such a time as they are activated by the life-giving Spirit, and the image of God is renewed in us.¹⁰

Empiricism (understood as an openness to the continuing movement of the Spirit), not dogmatism (understood as an unquestioning, authoritarian perpetuation—even imposition—of the past), was to characterize Wesley's unique contribution to theological methodology.

The next seven subsections (subsections 3-9) of Part 2 of the Interim Report, *The Problem of Doctrine and Doctrinal Standards in The United Methodist Church*, traced the historical development of the "problem" through the two predecessor denominations of The United Methodist Church: (§3) "The Model Deed" and the Methodist Standards of Doctrine, (§4) The Gist of the Wesleyan Doctrine in Sermons and Notes, (§5) Doctrinal Standards in American Methodism, (§6) The Evangelicals and United Brethren, (§7) The Evangelical "Articles," (§8) The United Brethren "Confession," and (§9) The EUB "Confession." The remaining four Subsections—(§10) Doctrinal Standards in The United Methodist Church, (§11) Anomalies and Confusion in the UMC, (§12) The

¹⁰ Theodore H. Runyon, "A New Look at 'Experience,'" Drew Gateway 57, (fall 1987) : 45-46.

Recovery of our “Common History,” and (§13) The Problem of Updating Our Doctrinal Heritage—addressed the task that then faced the interim committee.¹¹

Subsection 10, Doctrinal Standards in The United Methodist Church, sets the tone:

The architects of the Plan of Union of 1968 consciously avoided the difficulties of doctrinal decision: the line of least theological disturbance seemed also the line of least ecumenical resistance. . . . The Methodist Articles and the EUB Confession are printed back to back in the new [1972] Discipline. They are “deemed congruent if not identical in their doctrinal perspectives, and not in conflict.”

The authors of the Interim Report then seemed to question the apparent relevance of both the Methodist Articles and the EUB Confession: “. . . the Methodist Articles are not, and never have been, distinctively Wesleyan [emphasis in original] By the same token, the EUB articles and confessions have functioned rather less as primary doctrinal determinants than as boundaries.” The Subsection concluded, “Finally, it is painfully plain that the present ‘moment’ is inauspicious for the production of new creeds and confessions,” citing the difficulties of the United Church of Christ, the United Presbyterians, and Pope Paul VI.

Subsection 11 of the Interim Report, Anomalies and Confusion in the UMC, acknowledged the “deepening crisis of authority in the churches” and a “drastic erosion of force of external standards of every kind,” with the result that “there is a widening chasm . . . with respect to theological ‘opinions’—and

¹¹ UMC, Interim Report, 10-22.

essentials too!" All four elements of the "quadrilateral of standards," as presented in Part 2, Subsection 2—The Wesleyan Concept of Authority—are here depicted as under assault.

The primacy of Scripture can no longer be taken for granted; the pietistic appeal to "Christian experience" has undergone existentialist mutations; the rule of reason is under protest. Activism is "in"; tradition is "out." And in every case, the inevitable tension between any bid for consensus and the priceless values of intellectual and spiritual freedom is more tightly drawn than before. Truth can neither be established nor maintained by majority vote or the imposition of official creedal "standards."

This portion of the Interim Report concluded with a statement of the resulting theological predicament (i.e., the "problem" to which the title of Part 2 of the Interim Report refers):

the frequent mention of "our [emphasis in original] doctrines," with no definition of what the phrase refers to, . . . points up the dilemma of the church that has allowed such an ambivalence to develop between her official references to 'standards' and her actual theological self-understanding (or lack of it).¹²

The final two subsections of Part 2 propose, respectively, a look back and a look forward. Subsection 12 suggests, positively, the need for a more thorough mining of the histories and theologies of the three predecessor traditions of The United Methodist Church. Negatively, the subsection suggests the purging of the "more obtrusive anti-ecumenical residues" from official documents. The final subsection of Part 2, the look forward, arrives at the report's germinal issue; i.e., how to address the problem of updating the doctrinal heritage of the newly-formed The United Methodist Church. The simple "ecumenical drafting" of a new

¹² UMC, Interim Report, 18-20.

statement in the old rhetoric is rejected in that the outcome of such an approach would necessarily reflect neither the Wesleyan vision nor the spirit of perennial reform. The report suggests the re-investigation of Methodist and EUB standards of doctrine (Wesleyan Sermons and Notes and their EUB analogues) with the goal of recovering the dynamics (significantly, not the content!) of their respective traditions. It also raises the chronologically prior question, Is there a proper way to seek, much less arrive at, doctrinal consensus? If so, is such a consensus realistic, possible or even necessary? The authors conclude Part 2 of their Interim Report with a request for answers to their questions from the larger church.

The Report of the 1968 Theological Study Commission

The Theological Study Commission on Doctrine and Doctrinal Standards brought its final report to the 1972 General Conference. In his Introduction to the report Outler wrote that "The most obvious feature of this report is what it is not. It is not a new creed, nor a new set of Articles of Religion, nor a Confession of Faith, nor a new set of General Rules."¹³ The final paragraph of Outler's Introduction claims for the report that it "lays the foundations for the still further development of a stable theory of doctrinal interpretation in The United Methodist Church. It is offered less as a legislative statute than as an act of

¹³ Albert C. Outler, "Introduction to the Report of the 1968-72 Theological Study Commission," in Doctrine and Theology in The United Methodist Church, ed. Thomas A. Langford (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 1991), 20.

encouragement and enablement.”¹⁴

The Study Commission’s decision not to write a new creed, a new set of Articles of Religion, a new Confession of Faith, or a new set of General Rules was based upon their contention that “The effort to substitute new creeds for old has a long history of partisanship and schism.” Additionally, the report’s authors observed that “the theological spectrum in The United Methodist Church ranges over all the current mainstream options and a variety of special-interest theologies as well.”¹⁵ The authors claimed what Wesley referred to as a “catholic spirit” as the historical justification for this decision.¹⁶ As if to anticipate those who would object to a perceived lack of theological grounding, the next sentence asserts that “theological pluralism must not be confused with ‘theological indifferentism’—the notion that there are no essential doctrines and that differences in theology, when sincerely held, need no further discussion.” Two contemporary bases were cited as rationale for the validity of their decision to retain the tension between pluralism and indifferentism: 1) “our newer historical consciousness” and 2) our awareness of the transcendent mystery of divine truth that allows us in good conscience to acknowledge the positive virtues of doctrinal pluralism even within the same community of believers. The report

¹⁴ Outler, “Introduction,” 25.

¹⁵ Book of Discipline, 1972, 70.

¹⁶ John Wesley, Sermon 39, “Catholic Spirit,” in Sermons II, vol. 2 of The Works of John Wesley, ed. Albert C. Outler, Bicentennial ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1985), 81-95.

concludes,

Rightly understood, our history of doctrinal diversity in The United Methodist Church has been a source of strength, producing fruitful tension when accompanied with a genuine concern for the vital unity of Christian truth and life. United Methodists can heartily endorse the classical ecumenical watchword: "In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty; and, in all things, charity" (love that cares and understands).¹⁷

The fourth subsection of paragraph 70 of the 1972 Book of Discipline (Section 3—Our Theological Task) is entitled Doctrinal Guidelines in The United Methodist Church. The section begins with a question and its answer (and I quote at length),

Since "our present existing and established standards of doctrine" cited in the first two Restrictive Rules of the Constitution of The United Methodist Church are not to be construed literally and juridically,¹⁸ then by what methods can our doctrinal reflection and construction be most fruitful and fulfilling? The answer comes in terms of our free inquiry within the boundaries defined by four main sources and guidelines for Christian theology: Scripture, tradition, experience, reason. These four are interdependent; none can be defined unambiguously. They allow for, indeed they positively encourage, variety in United Methodist theologizing. Jointly, they have provided a broad and stable context for reflection and formulation. Interpreted with appropriate flexibility and self-discipline, they may instruct us as we carry forward our never-ending tasks of theologizing in The United Methodist Church.¹⁹

¹⁷ Book of Discipline, 1972, 70.

¹⁸ This assumption; i.e., that "the first two Restrictive Rules . . . are not to be construed literally and juridically," is not shared by all. Divergence on this point is a major contributor to current disagreements and/or misunderstandings. See, for example, Chapter 2, "The Quest for Doctrinal Standards" in William J. Abraham's Waking from Doctrinal Amnesia (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995), 31-52. See also Thomas C. Oden's "What Are 'Established Standards of Doctrine'?" in Doctrine and Theology in The United Methodist Church, ed. Thomas A. Langford (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 1991), 125-42.

¹⁹ Book of Discipline, 1972, 75.

Immediately following this introductory paragraph, each of the four elements of the quadrilateral—Scripture, tradition, experience, and reason—is explained under its own separate heading.²⁰

Scripture is acknowledged to be the primary source and guideline for doctrine, and the Bible is referred to as the “deposit of a unique testimony to God’s self-disclosures.”²¹ It [the Bible] is “the [emphasis mine] primitive source of the memories, images, and hopes by which the Christian community came into existence and that still confirm and nourish its faith and understanding” and “the constitutive witness to God’s self-revelation.”²² It is important to notice that in the discussion of tradition, experience, and reason, that follows, the 1972 Discipline defines all of them in terms of their relationship to Scripture.

Of tradition the report says that “all church traditions profess themselves bound to Scripture for their original insights and may rightly be judged by their essential faithfulness to its [Scripture’s] disclosures.” The explanation of tradition goes on to distinguish between tradition and traditionalism, traditionalism being “an uncritical acceptance of tradition.”²³ The explanation concludes by distinguishing between three contemporary dimensions of tradition and traditions. However, though the second dimension refers to “the multiple

²⁰ Book of Discipline, 1972, 75-78.

²¹ Book of Discipline, 1972, 75.

²² Book of Discipline, 1972, 76.

²³ Book of Discipline, 1972, 76.

traditions of the various churches understood as sociological phenomena: the specific historical differentiations within denominations or between them,²⁴ it makes no reference to either Wesley or tradition as he would have understood it. This omission will become one of the contributors to subsequent controversies surrounding the phrase Wesleyan Quadrilateral.

“Experience is to the individual,” says the Book of Discipline, 1972, “as tradition is to the Church as a whole: the personal appropriation of God’s unmeasured mercy in life and interpersonal relations.”²⁵ The paragraph continues by distinguishing between mere intellectual assent and “the personal experience of God’s pardoning and healing love” and then goes on to say that new life in Christ is what is meant by the phrase Christian experience. The paragraph concludes that “This specialized usage of the term ‘experience’ implies that any particular personal experiences of God’s accepting love will affect one’s total understanding of life and truth.”²⁶

The ambiguities of this explanation contain the seeds from which sprouted many of the subsequent controversies surrounding the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. Specifically, the apparently unqualified breadth of Christian experience’s influence on the understanding of Scripture, as compared with the apparent absence of any mention of Scripture’s role in understanding

²⁴ Book of Discipline, 1972, 77.

²⁵ Book of Discipline, 1972, 77.

²⁶ Book of Discipline, 1972, 77-78.

(supposedly) Christian experience, has proven especially troublesome. Additionally, in spite of the paragraph's emphasis on the role of corporate experience, American culture's veneration of individualism (including the religious sub-culture) seems to have muted, if not silenced, any suggestion of the individual's accountability to the community of faith. Also problematic has been the subsequent short-hand version of this aspect of the quadrilateral which dropped the adjective "Christian," leaving only the word "experience." The result has been an understanding of "experience" that may be nominally related to Wesley's use of the word but is substantially unrelated.

Reason is referred to as that critical analysis by which the Christian doctrines developed from Scripture, tradition, and "experience" may be commended to thoughtful persons as valid. While Christian doctrines must avoid "self-contradiction and take due account of scientific and empirical knowledge," nonetheless, it must be recognized that "revelation and 'experience' may transcend the scope of reason."²⁷ Significantly, the Book of Discipline, 1972's statement denies "reason's autonomy or omniscience" while acknowledging that "it does provide tests of cogency and credibility."²⁸

Explanation of the four elements of the quadrilateral is followed by a paragraph entitled These Guidelines in Interaction. The word "Interaction" is key, and the explanation that follows goes to considerable lengths to emphasize the

²⁷ Book of Discipline, 1972, 78.

²⁸ Book of Discipline, 1972, 78.

intended inseparability of the four elements. Again, I quote at length because of the significance of this emphasis in light of subsequent developments.

These four norms for doctrinal formulations are not simply parallel and none can be subsumed by any other. There is a primacy that goes with Scripture, as the constitutive witness to biblical wellsprings of our faith. In practice, however, theological reflection may find its point of departure in tradition, "experience" [again, note the quotation marks], or rational analysis. What matters most is that all four guidelines be brought to bear upon every doctrinal consideration.²⁹

The report of the Study Commission was adopted by the 1972 General Conference with fewer than twenty dissenting votes³⁰ and became Part II in the 1972 Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church.³¹ While there were criticisms of the 1972 statement from the beginning, there was no call for major changes until twelve years later.

²⁹ Book of Discipline, 1972, 78-79.

³⁰ Ted A. Campbell, "The 'Wesleyan Quadrilateral': The Story of a Modern Methodist Myth," in Doctrine and Theology in The United Methodist Church, ed. Thomas A. Langford (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 1991), 157.

³¹ Thomas A. Langford, "Introduction," 19.

CHAPTER 3

The Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Its Subsequent Development

This chapter will trace the broad outlines of the discussions surrounding the development of the theological construct that has come to be known as the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. The first section of this chapter will survey the events that occurred between the adoption of the doctrinal statement contained in the 1972 Discipline and its major revision as adopted into the 1988 Discipline. The second section will discuss three ambiguities in the phrase “Wesleyan Quadrilateral” that have given rise to controversy: (1) the nature of the phrase “doctrinal standards,” and the appropriateness of the terms (2) “quadrilateral” and (3) “Wesleyan.”¹ Each of these ambiguities will be explored by engaging specific authors and their critiques of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral.

From 1972 to 1988

The 1972 Discipline’s doctrinal statement generated some theological activity in the church subsequent to its publication, but many were disappointed with the limited scope of the discussion,² especially given the study

¹ W. Stephen Gunter et. al., Wesley and the Quadrilateral: Renewing the Conversation (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1997), 9.

² Richard P. Heitzenrater, “In Search of Continuity and Consensus: The Road to the 1988 Doctrinal Statement,” in Doctrine and Theology in The United Methodist Church, ed. Thomas A. Langford (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 1991), 93.

commission's stated desire that their work be received "less as a legislative statute than as an act of encouragement and enablement."³ In the concluding words of paragraph 70, section 3, of the 1972 Discipline, "Doctrine and doctrinal standards are never an end in themselves, nor even a resting place along the way."⁴

The relative calm came to an end, however, when the 1984 General Conference of The United Methodist Church received a "deluge" of petitions calling for the appointment of a new study committee to revisit the 1972 document.⁵ The Committee on "Our Theological Task" was appointed by the Council of Bishops in response to the General Conference's action on the petitions. This 1984 Study Committee prepared its own eight-point purpose statement based upon their understanding of the General Conference's action. Their third stated purpose was to "Address the significance and proper use of the 'Wesleyan Quadrilateral.'"⁶

The 1984 Study Committee met twice yearly between February of 1985 and October of 1987. Each gathering considered drafts, input, responses, and criticisms that had been received since the previous meeting. Substantive alterations were still being made to sections dealing with the fourfold guidelines

³ Outler, "Introduction," 21.

⁴ Book of Discipline, 1972, 82.

⁵ Heitzenrater, "Continuity and Consensus," 93.

⁶ Heitzenrater, "Continuity and Consensus," 95.

at the Committee's final meeting. Language perceived to be unduly rationalistic was removed, and the indispensability of all four guidelines, including the fact that "theological reflection always [emphasis mine] involves 'all four'," was re-emphasized.⁷ Significantly, the biblical text itself was cited as a model for the interaction among the fourfold guidelines. I quote at some length from the 1988 Discipline into which this committee's work was eventually adopted for inclusion:

The close relationship of tradition, experience, and reason appears in the Bible itself. Scripture witnesses to a variety of diverse traditions, some of which reflect tensions in interpretation within the early Judeo-Christian heritage. However, these traditions are woven together in the Bible in a manner that expresses the fundamental unity of God's revelation as received and experienced by people in the diversity of their own lives.

The developing communities of faith judged them, therefore, to be an authoritative witness to that revelation. In recognizing the interrelationship and inseparability of the four basic resources for theological understanding, we are following a model which is present in the biblical text itself.⁸

The new statement was approved unanimously by members of the 1984 Study Committee for submission to the General Conference.

Initial opposition to the Study Committee's statement was voiced by a group of evangelical United Methodist clergy who had met in Houston and had formulated what became known as "The Houston Declaration." The Declaration

⁷ Heitzenrater, "Continuity and Consensus," 101. Note 20 of this article points out specific examples of this contention as found in three statements that were added to the sections on "Tradition," "Experience," and "Reason."

⁸ The United Methodist Church (U.S.), The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, 1988 (Nashville, TN: United Methodist Publishing House, 1988), 82-83.

"seemed [emphasis mine] to affirm the Committee on 'Our Theological Task'" by responding favorably to brief quotes from the committee's document. Another group of United Methodist clergy evidently interpreted the Declaration's comments as a case of "damning by faint praise." They responded to the Declaration with a document entitled "Perfect Love Casts Out Fear." This second group indicated that they saw no reason to change the 1972 doctrinal statement in the first place and that they feared the new statement would "move our church into a narrow sectarian and repressive stance."⁹ A statement made by Professor Thomas Oden in an article published in 1988, prior to the General Conference, added to the brewing controversy. Oden claimed that the new statement had abandoned Wesley's Sermons and Notes as doctrinal standards, effectively excising standard references to them.¹⁰ Oden's concerns were not without grounds, given the fact that in 1985 Richard Heitzenrater, a Vice Chairman of the Committee on Our Theology Task and chairperson of the writing sub-committee,¹¹ published an article in which he argued on historical grounds that early American Methodists excised Wesley's Sermons and Notes from the

⁹ "Perfect Love Casts Out Fear," Circuit Rider, 12 April 1988, 18.

¹⁰ Thomas Oden, "Here I Stand: Keep Wesley's 'Sermons,' 'Notes' in Theology Report," United Methodist Reporter, 8 January 1988, 2.

¹¹ Richard Heitzenrater, "At Full Liberty: Doctrinal Standards in Early American Methodism," in Doctrine and Theology in The United Methodist Church, ed. Thomas A. Langford (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 1991), n. 1, 250.

Minutes, thus eliminating them as doctrinal standards in American Methodism.¹²

Some members of the 1984 Study Committee suspected that people were responding not to the report itself, but to fears being projected onto the report. Professor Thomas Ogletree, a member of the 1984 Study Committee, addressed critics from all perspectives in an article entitled "In Quest of a Common Faith: The Theological Task of United Methodists."¹³ The article emphasized the Study Committee's desire to receive, engage, and incorporate the concerns of critics of the 1972 Statement on the one hand, and to retain essential continuity on the other. In a spirit consistent with the writers of the 1972 Statement, Ogletree acknowledged that the committee's report, if adopted, "will doubtless require further reworking from time to time."¹⁴

Ogletree highlighted three notable changes in the proposed statement of the 1984 Study Committee. The first was a change in its "overall tenor." Unlike the 1972 Statement which explicitly affirmed theological pluralism, the proposed new statement stresses the need for a renewed quest for theological common ground. This shift in emphasis was, according to Ogletree, a response to the emergence of a threat that had arisen subsequent to the 1972 Statement.

¹² Heitzenrater, "At Full Liberty."

¹³ Thomas Ogletree, "In Quest of a Common Faith: The Theological Task of United Methodists," in Doctrine and Theology in The United Methodist Church, ed. Thomas A. Langford (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 1991), 168-75.

¹⁴ Ogletree, 169.

Whereas in 1972 the perceived threat was that of doctrinal rigidity, the newly emerging threat was perceived to be one of theological confusion and fragmentation. "The new statement," writes Ogletree, "presumes that as United Methodists we do in fact have authoritative doctrinal standards."¹⁵

A second change in the proposed new statement concerned the reorganization of its discussion of the basic sources and criteria of theology. The section on Scripture highlighted Scriptural primacy, and tradition, reason, and experience were linked more closely to the interpretation of Scripture. Ogletree then made a distinction that often seems to be lost or at least neglected: "Where United Methodists disagree, it is not over the primacy of Scripture, but over the way Scripture is received and interpreted."¹⁶ The third change which Ogletree mentioned pertained to the role of Wesley's Sermons and Notes as doctrinal standards, specifically the concerns of Thomas Oden that the proposed statement drops the Sermons and Notes as doctrinal standards. Ogletree sides with Heitzenrater in contending that "the 1808 General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church apparently did not intend to place Wesley's Sermons and Notes under the protection of the First Restrictive Rule."¹⁷ However, Ogletree sought to allay Oden's concerns by pointing out that the Study Committee both embraced the outcomes of Heitzenrater's historical

¹⁵ Ogletree, 170.

¹⁶ Ogletree, 172.

¹⁷ Ogletree, 173.

research and retained the Sermons and Notes as doctrinal standards by developing a distinction between formal doctrinal standards (the Articles of Religion and the Confession of Faith) on one hand and traditional doctrinal standards (Wesley's Sermons and Notes) on the other.

The report of the 1984 Study Committee was sent to the Legislative Committee on Faith and Mission at the April 1988 meeting of the General Conference. After final discussions and revisions that involved not only the Legislative Committee, but also members of the Study Committee itself, the document was accepted by a positive vote of over 90%. The revised document was duly accepted by the plenary session of the General Conference the next day.¹⁸

Ambiguities in the Wesleyan Quadrilateral

"Perhaps no theological topic has been the focus of more debate within The United Methodist Church over the past quarter century than the 'Wesleyan Quadrilateral.'¹⁹ So begins the "Introduction" to the 1997 publication Wesley and the Quadrilateral: Renewing the Conversation. The book itself is testimony to the fact that conversations surrounding the Wesleyan Quadrilateral have not subsided. The twenty-five year old event that began the debate to which Wesley and the Quadrilateral refers was the 1972 General Conference of The United Methodist Church discussed in the previous chapter. The "Introduction" goes on

¹⁸ Heitzenrater, "Continuity and Consensus," 107.

¹⁹ Gunter et al., 10.

to discuss three major ambiguities that emerged from the 1968 Study Committee's decision to articulate a distinctively Wesleyan theological methodology instead of formulating a new creed for the fledgling The United Methodist Church. These three ambiguities serve also to identify areas of contemporary disagreement regarding the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, and so they will be examined below in some detail.

Ambiguity Regarding "Doctrinal Guidelines/Standards"

The first ambiguity arose from the fact that the work of the 1968 Study Commission on Doctrine and Doctrinal Standards resulted in neither new doctrine nor doctrinal standards. Rather, the new work proposed by the committee and subsequently included 1972 Book of Discipline was entitled "Doctrinal Guidelines."²⁰ The ambiguity resulted in a blurring of the distinction between doctrinal standards and doctrinal guidelines, the first of which is primarily content oriented and the second of which is primarily methodology oriented.²¹

The ambiguity surrounding this aspect of the quadrilateral is exemplified in the work of William J. Abraham. In a 1985 article, "The Wesleyan Quadrilateral," he addressed and sought to clarify issues surrounding the phrase "doctrinal guidelines" (as opposed to doctrinal standards) in relation to the Quadrilateral. Ten years later Abraham wrote a book in which he called for the

²⁰ 1972 Discipline, 75.

²¹ Gunter et al., 10.

rejection of the quadrilateral. What transpired in those intervening ten years?

The opening sentence of Abraham's 1985 article betrays an ambivalence toward both the language and the conceptualization the Quadrilateral represents, even as he tries to reclaim it by clarifying the limits of its usefulness. He writes, "The Wesleyan Quadrilateral is in itself an unwieldy and awkward object of thought."²² He goes on:

The realities these terms refer to or embody are exceedingly complex, so much so that there will always be a temptation to short-circuit the discussion by assuming that at the end of the day only one of them really counts in making decisions in theology.²³

Abraham then provides historical examples of those who emphasized one component of the Quadrilateral at the expense of the others—i.e., deists who preferred reason, nineteenth-century liberals who preferred experience, and fundamentalists who chose Scripture.

Abraham attributes United Methodism's attraction to the Wesleyan Quadrilateral to the "diversity, disagreement, and division [that] are central facts of [the denomination's] theological life." How is the diversity of theological positions which constitutes the family of United Methodism to be held together? He contends that the answer has been to attain as much agreement as possible on procedures or methodologies. But which methodologies will work, he wonders

²² William J. Abraham, "The Wesleyan Quadrilateral," in Wesleyan Theology Today, ed. Theodore H. Runyon (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 1985), 119-26.

²³ Abraham, "Wesleyan Quadrilateral," 119.

aloud?²⁴ He responds to the question with a quote from the 1980 Discipline:

"The answer comes in terms of our free inquiry within the boundaries defined by four main sources and guidelines for Christian theology: Scripture, tradition, experience, reason."²⁵ He continues,

The quadrilateral therefore has a pivotal place in modern Methodist theology in America and is intimately related to the pluralism which has been officially adopted. Perhaps it would be fair to say that it serves to hold the line on the integrity of the tradition. If there can be no agreement on what [emphasis mine] to believe, it is implicitly said, then let there at least be agreement on the context or criteria [emphases mine] of Christian believing.²⁶

Despite his lack of enthusiasm for the quadrilateral, Abraham nonetheless concedes that though, to his knowledge, Wesley never mentioned the quadrilateral, still he [Wesley] was committed to an informal methodology which provided at least some justification for the contemporary term "quadrilateral" and its underlying concept: "A careful reading of the standard sermons reveals that Wesley characteristically appealed to Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience when he wanted to defend or support his theology."²⁷

Having affirmed to his own satisfaction that Wesley was indeed committed to the quadrilateral, Abraham then poses four questions that he believes

²⁴ Abraham, "Wesleyan Quadrilateral," 119.

²⁵ The United Methodist Church, The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, 1980 (Nashville, TN: United Methodist Publishing House, 1980), 68.

²⁶ Abraham, "Wesleyan Quadrilateral," 119.

²⁷ Abraham, "Wesleyan Quadrilateral," 120.

contemporary Wesleyans, who are seriously committed to implementing the quadrilateral as doctrinal guidelines, must answer.

There is, first, the question of meaning. How are we to construe Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience? . . . Second, how are we to characterize the relation between these four factors? . . . Third, is the question of justification. Why should these four considerations be seen as crucially relevant to deciding the truth of any particular theological proposal? . . . [and] Fourth, there is the question of practicality. Is it really possible for a modern theologian to draw together the combined force of the data provided by Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience and then use these to build an adequate theology?²⁸

Concerning the first two of these questions—Wesley’s construal of Scripture, tradition, reason and experience, and the relationships among the four factors—Abraham argues that, based upon Wesley’s doctrine of divine revelation and inspiration, “none of the other [three] elements of the quadrilateral can be viewed as a coordinate canon of equal standing with the Bible.” For Wesley, contends Abraham, Scripture (understood as the canon of sixty-six books contained in the Old and New Testaments of the Christian Bible) constitutes “the fundamental criterion for all theological proposals.”

Tradition, reason, and experience are subordinate sources whose primary function is to enable us to rightly interpret Scripture. Tradition, specifically that of the primitive church as found in the early Fathers and as mediated (so he believed) by the Anglican tradition, was an interpretive aid to Scripture’s teaching.²⁹ Wesley’s commitment to the use of reason in religion is thoroughly

²⁸ Abraham, “Wesleyan Quadrilateral,” 120.

²⁹ Abraham, “Wesleyan Quadrilateral,” 120-21.

consistent with his Anglican tradition, which, during its formative years, appealed to reason as a defense for its via media between the feared extremes of Catholic traditionalism on one hand and Reformed biblicism on the other.³⁰ However, Wesley's appeal to reason is neither simple nor simplistic. For Wesley, reason is not, in and of itself, a source of knowledge. Rather, all knowledge must be mediated through the senses. Once the senses provide the raw material, then reason can apprehend, judge, and discuss the raw material. Wesley understood, however, the severe limitations of reason in the realm of religion. He knew from personal experience that reason could produce neither faith nor love, and, therefore, neither virtue nor happiness. Therefore something "more than reason is utterly essential if the truth about God is to be known."³¹

Abraham's discussion of reason and its limitations helps to clarify the crucial role that experience plays in Wesley's theology. However, as with Wesley's understanding of reason, so his understanding of experience was more complex than is sometimes recognized. Wesley believed that our senses are corrupted by sin and its effects, and therefore, are not to be trusted. Therefore reason, which requires the data provided by the senses, has no reliable data upon which to operate. Our fallen nature needs to be healed by God.

³⁰ Richard P. Heitzenrater, Wesley and the People Called Methodists (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995), 10.

³¹ Abraham, "Wesleyan Quadrilateral," 121.

At this point Wesley posited a spiritual parallel to his understanding of reason's function in the physical realm. True knowledge of God required a sense-experience of God which could provide the raw data upon which reason could do its work. Just as the spiritual senses are analogous to the physical senses, so spiritual experience is analogous to normal sense experience. Abraham writes of Wesley's understanding of experience, "By means of spiritual faculties one tastes, sees, and perceives the things of God. Such experience involves firsthand, un-inferred, immediate acquaintance with the divine world."³² According to Wesley, the experience of the Holy Spirit that occurred in the New Birth not only provided reason with the needed raw spiritual material, it also functioned to restore a person's spiritual senses that had been desensitized by sin.³³

Abraham then makes a distinction that is of some interest in regard to the issue of primacy, a distinction that will be addressed in Part 2 of this dissertation. He writes that "it should be recognized that the appeal to experience is logically prior in Wesley to the appeal to Scripture"³⁴ (to which I would add, chronologically prior as well). Greater recognition and understanding of Abraham's nuanced distinction between primacy and chronological priority would, it seems to me, greatly improve both the tone and the quality of current discussions

³² Abraham, "Wesleyan Quadrilateral," 122.

³³ Abraham, "Wesleyan Quadrilateral," 121-22.

³⁴ Abraham, "Wesleyan Quadrilateral," 122.

surrounding the quadrilateral.

Concerning Abraham's third question—i.e., "Why should these four considerations be seen as crucially relevant to deciding the truth of any particular theological proposal?"—he concludes simply that:

the basic attraction of the quadrilateral is surely that it captures in a convenient principle the need for the theologian to consult all relevant data and warrants before arriving at any particular theological proposal. Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience, these four cover the various fields to be consulted. It is difficult to see how any relevant considerations would be omitted if these were properly explored.³⁵

The fourth and final question which Abraham feels that anyone who is serious about the quadrilateral must answer is "the question of practicality. Is it really possible for a modern theologian to draw together the combined force of the data provided by Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience and then use these to build an adequate theology."³⁶ Abraham feels that this question poses the most serious threat of all to the viability of the quadrilateral. The enormity of the data to be interpreted and absorbed by one who would attempt to run a significant issue through the gamut of Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience would be staggering and potentially unmanageable. However, despite this gloomy picture he paints, Abraham's inclination is that the situation is not as grim as initial appearances might suggest, especially if we are willing to weigh Scripture and the early creeds as Wesley did. And finally, confesses

³⁵ Abraham, "Wesleyan Quadrilateral," 123.

³⁶ Abraham, "Wesleyan Quadrilateral," 120.

Abraham, “the quadrilateral is still worth retaining as an ideal to chasten us in our endeavors.”³⁷

Some ten years after the publication of his article, “Wesleyan Quadrilateral,” in which he addressed issues surrounding the Wesleyan Quadrilateral as doctrinal guidelines, William Abraham wrote Waking from Doctrinal Amnesia: The Healing of Doctrine in The United Methodist Church.³⁸ Whereas in his earlier article Abraham sought to retain what was of value in the quadrilateral by clarifying the limitations of its role, his book calls unequivocally for the rejection of the quadrilateral. The second chapter of his book, “The Quest for Doctrinal Standards,” traces the history of the “quest” from its origin in the creation of United Methodism as a new denomination, through uncertainty about doctrinal identity, and concluding with the report of the 1972 Study Commission, which, as was noted above, chose to resolve doctrinal uncertainty by focusing upon methodology rather than content.³⁹ He then summarizes the events surrounding the revision of 1988 and affirms the outcome:

Clearly all these complex developments contributed in their own way to removing the suspicion that United Methodists had opted for doctrinal indifference when they embraced an identity that focused primarily on method or process of doing theology, rather than on any doctrinal consensus. Doctrinal indifference was countered by being much clearer about the role of The Articles of Religion, the Confessions of Faith, and

³⁷ Abraham, “Wesleyan Quadrilateral,” 126.

³⁸ William J. Abraham, Waking from Doctrinal Amnesia: The Healing of Doctrine in The United Methodist Church (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995).

³⁹ Abraham, Doctrinal Amnesia, 31-32.

the Sermons and Notes, by making more explicit the relation between scripture and the other three elements of the quadrilateral.⁴⁰

From 1988 to the publication of his book in 1995, however, Abraham's attitude toward the quadrilateral becomes decidedly negative, as exemplified by the section heading in chapter three—"Why We Must Reject the Methodist Quadrilateral." It is, in his opinion, responsible for the denomination's doctrinal amnesia and has outlived its usefulness. His call for the rejection of the quadrilateral is based upon his observation that, though it has no de jure claim as a standard of doctrine in The United Methodist Church, it has, nonetheless, become the de facto benchmark of United Methodist identity.⁴¹ For Abraham, "The crucial point to be made is that the primary content of the doctrinal standards is doctrine" [emphasis in original].⁴²

Ambiguity Regarding the Term "Quadrilateral"

A second ambiguity that resulted from the Study Commission's compromise decision to retain doctrinal standards from the predecessor denominations of the 1968 merger of The Methodist Church and The Evangelical United Brethren Church and focus instead of doctrinal guidelines surrounds the appropriateness of the word "quadrilateral." (It is important to remember again that the word "quadrilateral" appeared in neither the 1972

⁴⁰ Abraham, Doctrinal Amnesia, 49-50.

⁴¹ Abraham, Doctrinal Amnesia, 56-57.

⁴² Abraham, Doctrinal Amnesia, 67.

Discipline nor in any subsequent Discipline. It's use was and is a remnant of it's one occurrence in the 1970 interim report of the 1968 Study Commission.) One Wesley scholar, Scott J. Jones, argues that Wesley engaged Scripture in conversation not only with tradition (understood narrowly as Christian antiquity), reason, and experience, but also with the Church of England.⁴³ Consistent with this contention, in the two chapters in Jones' book in which he discusses the interrelationships among Scripture and other sources of authority, he does in fact include a separate section for the Church of England along with one section each for Christian antiquity, reason, and experience.⁴⁴ Thus, if one were to apply Jones's conclusions to our discussion of the problematic nature of the term "quadrilateral," the very appropriateness of the term's "four-ness" is called into question. Jones' argument suggests, in effect, that the four-sided metaphor, "quadrilateral," would have to be expanded to a five-sided metaphor—a Wesleyan Pentagon(?).

By far the greater concern regarding the term "quadrilateral" has to do with the question of the relative primacy among its four constituent parts. Which of the four components carries the greatest evidentiary weight? For many the term failed to emphasize adequately the primacy of Scripture. The title of a 1986

⁴³ Scott J. Jones, John Wesley's Conception and Use of Scripture (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 1995), 64.

⁴⁴ Jones, 89, 175.

article by Robert Tuttle, "Wesleyan Quadrilateral–Not Equilateral,"⁴⁵ captured well the concern voiced by many. Tuttle writes that "If we are ever to be United Methodist, we must realize that quadrilateral does not mean equilateral. Wesley appealed to Scripture, reason, tradition, and experience when attempting to document and support his own position. But his quadrilateral had a dominant side—Scripture."⁴⁶

Like Tuttle, Scott Jones is a strong and articulate defender of the view that for Wesley, Scripture was primary. His 1995 book, John Wesley's Conception and Use of Scripture, speaks to the concerns of those for whom the 1972 statement's ambiguity regarding scriptural primacy was problematic. Jones entitles two chapters "The Authority of Scripture Alone" and "The Characteristics of Scripture."⁴⁷ He contends that the apparent paradox between Wesley's conception of Scripture as sole authority for Christian faith and practice on one hand, and his willingness to acknowledge authoritative roles for reason, Christian antiquity, experience, and the Church of England on the other, must begin with Wesley's understanding of Scripture alone.

Jones begins his examination with a discussion of Wesley's understanding of revelation. A quote from Wesley's Preface to his Explanatory

⁴⁵ Robert G. Tuttle, "The Wesleyan Quadrilateral–Not Equilateral," in Basic United Methodist Beliefs, ed. James V. Heidinger II (Wilmore, KY: Bristol Books, 1986), 19-25.

⁴⁶ Tuttle, 20.

⁴⁷ Jones.

Notes upon the New Testament sets the stage:

Concerning the Scriptures in general, it may be observed, the word of the living God, which directed the first Patriarchs also, was, in the time of Moses, committed to writing. To this were added, in several succeeding generations, the inspired writings of the other Prophets. Afterwards, what the Son of God preached, and the Holy Ghost spake by the Apostles, the Apostles and Evangelists wrote.⁴⁸

Jones notes specifically that this description minimizes the role of the human authors. He points to Wesley's comments on Revelation 1:20 in which he appears to be espousing a dictation theory of revelation when he writes of the author that "what was contained in the second and third chapters was dictated to him in like manner."⁴⁹

There are other places, however, as Jones notes, where Wesley's terms are much more carefully nuanced and, therefore, much less amenable to overstated generalizations. On occasion Wesley distinguishes between those parts of Scripture that contain "particular revelation" and those which do not. A "particular revelation," according to Wesley, occurred when specific words were given to a person to be written down, such as in the passage from Revelation, quoted above. Commenting on 1 Corinthians 7:25—"I have no commandment from the Lord"—Wesley wrote, "At other times they wrote from the divine light which abode with them, the standing treasure of the Spirit of God. And this, also,

⁴⁸ John Wesley, Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament (London: Epworth Press, 1976), 8-9.

⁴⁹ Wesley, Explanatory Notes, Revelation 1:20, 942.

was not their private opinion, but a divine rule of faith and practice.”⁵⁰ Such instances, which Jones contends is the case for most Scripture, allow “much more human participation in the process.”⁵¹ Jones summarizes Wesley’s understanding of the process of revelation

as a divine-human collaboration where the message of God is accurately communicated, but in a way that does not override human faculties, judgments, and motivations. This allows for ignorance on the part of the writers of Scripture, as well as confusion about some basic points. Most of Scripture comes from the “standing treasure of the Spirit of God,” which was with the inspired men all of the time. Some parts of Scripture, however, originate in “particular” revelation where the precise words are commanded to be written and are faithfully transcribed.⁵²

Jones then argues from revelation to the inspiration of Scripture.⁵³ Human participation notwithstanding, God is understood to be the author of the text of Scripture. Therefore, they are infallible and trustworthy, and “ought to serve as the sole [emphasis mine] authority for Christian faith and practice.”⁵⁴

Building on his argument for Wesley’s view that Scripture alone is the sole authority for Christian faith and practice, Jones addresses five additional characteristics that describe Wesley’s view of Scripture, four of which—the

⁵⁰ Wesley, Explanatory Notes, 1 Corinthians 7:25, 605.

⁵¹ Jones, 19.

⁵² Jones, 20.

⁵³ Jones, 21.

⁵⁴ Jones, 23-24.

sufficiency of Scripture for teaching doctrines,⁵⁵ the clarity of Scripture,⁵⁶ the relation of the Old Testament and the New Testament,⁵⁷ and the canonicity of Scripture⁵⁸—stand in the mainstream of the Protestant theology of Wesley's day. A fifth characteristic, what Jones refers to as the wholeness of Scripture or the analogy of faith, was unique to Wesley.⁵⁹ Wesley writes in his sermon "The End of Christ's Coming" that the essence of the Christian religion "runs through the Bible from the beginning to the end, in one connected chain. And the agreement of every part of it with every other is properly the analogy of faith [emphasis in original]."⁶⁰ According to Jones, the analogy of faith means for Wesley that "Scripture is consistent in all its parts and there is a general theme of the text that can be identified."⁶¹ In Wesley's words, the analogy of faith forms a "grand scheme of doctrine . . . touching original sin, justification by faith, and present, inward salvation."⁶² Wesley's analogy of faith functions for him both as a norm

⁵⁵ Jones, 37-41.

⁵⁶ Jones, 41-43.

⁵⁷ Jones, 53-58.

⁵⁸ Jones, 59-60.

⁵⁹ Jones, 43-53.

⁶⁰ John Wesley, Sermon 62, "The End of Christ's Coming," § 3.5, in Sermons II, vol. 2 of The Works of John Wesley, ed. Albert C. Outler, Bicentennial ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1985), 483.

⁶¹ Jones, 47.

⁶² Wesley, Explanatory Notes, Romans 12:6, 569.

for theology and as a rule to be used in interpreting Scripture. It is the presupposition that Wesley brings to his interpretation of Scripture.⁶³

Jones follows his two chapters on the authority and characteristics of Scripture with a chapter entitled “The Authority of Scripture in Tension with Other Authorities.” Having established his understanding of Wesley’s view of the primacy of Scripture, Jones goes to great lengths in this chapter to emphasize the complementary nature of the interrelationships among the various authorities and the unity of their witness. Says Jones,

A correct understanding of Scripture is dependent on the other [authorities]. Reason and antiquity are needed for proper interpretation. . . Experience proves the promises of Scripture to be true and can even correct one’s interpretation at times [emphasis mine]. Conversely, the very definitions of how the other four are properly used involve their fidelity to Scripture. Any position that denies the inspiration and authority of Scripture is irrational. Only those parts of antiquity and the Church of England that conform to Scripture are authoritative. Experience alone [emphasis mine] cannot prove or generate doctrine it merely confirms or corrects what Scripture teaches. The authorities are . . . really . . . one.⁶⁴

Ambiguity Regarding the Term “Wesleyan”

A third ambiguity embodied in 1968 Study Commission’s compromise as embodied in the 1972 Book of Discipline has to do with the accuracy of the term “Wesleyan” in relationship to the quadrilateral: “could a conscious and consistent emphasis on the four guidelines really be demonstrated in Wesley? And, even if it was evident in Wesley, was it something distinctive [emphasis in

⁶³ Jones, 48-49.

⁶⁴ Jones, 102.

original] of him?”⁶⁵ This section will explore the validity of the claim that the Quadrilateral is grounded in John Wesley by exploring two articles, one by Albert Outler, “Wesleyan Quadrilateral—In John Wesley,”⁶⁶ and another by Ted A. Campbell, “The ‘Wesleyan Quadrilateral’: The Story of a Modern Methodist Myth.”⁶⁷

Outler observes that, despite the reams of instruction supplied by Wesley to his Methodist movement, only one document resembles a consciously systematized doctrinal statement, his “Open Letter to a Roman Catholic” (1749),⁶⁸ “and even this was an obvious borrowing from Bishop John Pearson’s classic Exposition of the Doctrine of the Creed.”⁶⁹ The upshot of this observation for Outler is the question, “What did he [Wesley] expect his people to identify as their ‘standards of doctrine’?”⁷⁰ Since Wesley was aware, contends Outler, that Scripture alone rarely settled doctrinal disputes (advocates of multiple opinions all claimed the support of Scripture for their position), Wesley sought to buttress his interpretation of Scripture with the testimonies of tradition, reason, and

⁶⁵ Gunter, et al., 11

⁶⁶ Outler, “Wesleyan Quadrilateral,” 75-92.

⁶⁷ Campbell, “Wesleyan Quadrilateral,” 154-61.

⁶⁸ John Wesley, “A Letter to a Roman Catholic,” in John Wesley, ed. Albert C. Outler (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964).

⁶⁹ Outler, “Wesleyan Quadrilateral,” 75.

⁷⁰ Outler, “Wesleyan Quadrilateral,” 75.

experience.⁷¹

First, Wesley abridged the first four of the Edwardian Homilies into a brief theological charter that he entitled The Doctrine of Justification according to the Church of England. Then he gathered together and published the “Minutes” of conversations he had with his assistants. A version of these “Minutes,” known as “The Large Minutes,” was accepted by the nascent Methodist Episcopal Church in America. These “Minutes” were eventually subsumed within the scope of what came to be called “The First Restrictive Rule” (1808) which both defines and limits “our present existing, and established, standards of doctrine.”⁷² “The Model Deed” of 1763 stipulated that “no other doctrine than is contained in Mr. Wesley’s Notes Upon the New Testament (in which he borrowed heavily from others) and four volumes of Sermons” was to be preached in Methodist chapels.⁷³ According to Outler, this provided Wesley with a doctrinal canon that was both stable and flexible. In this canon

the Holy Scriptures stand first and foremost, and yet subject to interpretations that are informed by “Christian Antiquity,” critical reason and [emphasis in original] an existential appeal to the “Christian Experience” of grace, so firmly stressed in the Explanatory Notes. . . . All this suggests that Wesley was clearly interested in coherent doctrinal

⁷¹ Outler, “Wesleyan Quadrilateral,” 77.

⁷² Outler, “Wesleyan Quadrilateral,” 76. The “First Restrictive Rule” may be found on page 27 of the Discipline of The United Methodist Church, 2004.

⁷³ Outler, “Wesleyan Quadrilateral,” 76. See also The Works of John Wesley, ed. Thomas Jackson, CD ROM ed., “Minutes of Several Conversations between the Rev. Mr. Wesley and Others,” vol. 8, Q/A 61 (Franklin, TN: Providence House Publishers, 2005).

norms but was equally clear in his aversion to having such norms defined too narrowly or in too juridical a form.⁷⁴

For Outler, then, the fourfold pattern that has come to be known as the Wesleyan (though not Wesley's) Quadrilateral is present in Wesley, at least in an incipient form.

Ted Campbell writes: "From an historical perspective, the notion that this fourfold pattern can be attributed to, or easily found in the works of, John Wesley has to be seriously questioned."⁷⁵ Campbell traces the origins of the notion of a "Wesleyan Quadrilateral" to Colin W. Williams's 1960 book, John Wesley's Theology Today. As a participant in the ecumenical movement, Williams was attempting to relate Wesley's doctrine of authority with that of other confessional traditions. He did so by identifying sources of authority in John Wesley; the first two dealt with Scripture (The Inspiration of Scripture and The Method of Biblical Inspiration), and the final three were tradition, reason, and experience. Williams's linking of the four sources with Wesley proved to be a foreshadowing of the subsequent developments spearheaded by Outler and the 1968 Theological Study Commission on Doctrine and Doctrinal Standards, as discussed above. The 1970 Interim Report referred to the fourfold pattern as "Wesleyan Concept of Authority."⁷⁶ Revisions made subsequent to the 1970

⁷⁴ Outler, "Wesleyan Quadrilateral," 76.

⁷⁵ Campbell, "Wesleyan Quadrilateral," 155.

⁷⁶ UMC, Interim Report, 7.

Interim Report resulted in the corresponding section in the 1972 Discipline being entitled “Doctrinal Guidelines in The United Methodist Church,”⁷⁷ thus weakening the implied connection between the fourfold pattern or guidelines and Wesley.

Campbell offers several arguments in support of what he considers to be the tendentious nature of the connection between Wesley and the Quadrilateral. One of his arguments pertains to the anachronistic assignment of contemporary meanings to words used by Wesley, specifically the words “experience” and “reason.” The use of the word “experience” in the 1972 Discipline refers not only to religious experience or experimental religion (as in Wesley), but also “our general experience of the world.”⁷⁸ Likewise, the use of the word “reason” in the 1972 Discipline is used in the contemporary sense of “rational analysis” rather than in the eighteenth-century British sense of reason as reflection on experience.⁷⁹

Though the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, both the terminology and the underlying concept it is intended to represent, are beset by ambiguities—three of which have been addressed here, all indications are that it and its ambiguities are here to stay. At the very least, quoting Ted Campbell, “The very fact that it has provoked serious debate among Methodists on a central theological issue is

⁷⁷ Book of Discipline, 1972, 75.

⁷⁸ Campbell, “Wesleyan Quadrilateral,” 157.

⁷⁹ Campbell, “Wesleyan Quadrilateral,” 157.

convincing evidence of its service.”⁸⁰

⁸⁰ Campbell, “Wesleyan Quadrilateral,” 154.

CHAPTER 4

“The Wesleyan Quadrilateral—In John Wesley”¹

As we have seen thus far, scholars on all sides of the contemporary debates regarding the Wesleyan Quadrilateral acknowledge the importance of scripture, tradition, reason, and experience in the ministry of John Wesley. Likewise, scholars on all sides of the contemporary debates also presume to speak for Wesley. The sheer volume of Wesley’s writings, not to mention his penchant for hyperbole and the evolution of his convictions over time, make it relatively easy to isolate a “proof text” in support of a wide variety of theological opinions. This chapter will establish the presence and importance of the four elements of what has become known as the Wesleyan Quadrilateral in John Wesley’s own writings. It will also set the stage for Part 2 of this dissertation by calling into question contemporary discussions of the four elements in John Wesley that tend to treat them as independent entities.

¹ Those who are familiar with the conversations surrounding the Wesleyan Quadrilateral will recognize this chapter title as borrowed from a seminal article by Albert Outler, first published in 1985 and more recently reprinted as “The Wesleyan Quadrilateral—In John Wesley,” in Doctrine and Theology in The United Methodist Church, ed. Thomas A. Langford (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 1991), 75-92.

Scripture in John Wesley

As a self-described homo unius libri,² “man of one book,” one of John Wesley’s clearer statements on the theme of Scripture as divine revelation is found in the Preface to his Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament. He writes,

Concerning the Scriptures in general, it may be observed, the word of the living God, which directed the first Patriarchs also, was, in the time of Moses, committed to writing. To this were added, in several succeeding generations, the inspired writings of the other Prophets. Afterwards, what the Son of God preached, and the Holy Ghost spake by the Apostles, the Apostles and the Evangelists wrote.³

Revelation is for Wesley “a communication of the divine message from God to God’s chosen messengers.”⁴ He distinguishes between different types of revelation. In his explanatory notes on 1 Corinthians 7:25 he distinguishes between those occasions on which the apostles “had a particular revelation, and a special commandment” and other occasions when “they wrote from the divine light which abode with them, the standing treasure of the Spirit of God. And this, also, was not their private opinion, but a divine rule of faith and practice.”⁵

Wesley mentions at least three ways in which Scripture’s human authors

² John Wesley, Preface, § 5, in Sermons I, vol. 1 of The Works of John Wesley, ed. Albert C. Outler, Bicentennial ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1984), 104.

³ Wesley, Explanatory Notes, 8-9.

⁴ Jones, 18.

⁵ Wesley, Explanatory Notes, 605.

participated in its transcription. First, they incorporated into their writings truths from sources outside of Scripture. Second, their normal human rational faculties were left intact. Commenting on 1 Corinthians 14:32, Wesley writes:

The impulses of the Holy Spirit, even in men really inspired, so suit themselves to their rational faculties, as not to divest them of the government of themselves, . . . the Spirit of God left his prophets the clear use of their judgment, when, and how long, it was fit for them to speak, and never hurried them into any improprieties either as to the matter, manner, or time of their speaking.⁶

Finally, human authors participated in Scripture's transcription by the determinative influence of their own motivations for writing. Wesley's understanding of divine-human collaboration in the process of revelation allows for the nuances of human faculties, judgments, and motivations without jeopardizing the accurate communication of the message from God. Though he emphasizes the faithful transcription of the divine message, Wesley clearly acknowledges both the divine and the human elements of revelation, thus distinguishing himself from proponents of mechanical dictation theories of revelation.⁷ The result of the process of revelation is an inspired Scripture, shaped by human authors but ultimately authored by God.⁸

Since for Wesley God is the author of Scripture, he also understands Scripture to be infallible. His understanding of Scripture's infallibility manifests

⁶ Wesley, Explanatory Notes, 631.

⁷ Jones, 18.

⁸ Jones, 21.

itself when he comes to a conclusion concerning the teaching of Scripture on a certain issue. Under such a circumstance he considers himself to be arguing from a position of certainty, since God cannot be a liar. Since Scriptures alone are infallible and therefore trustworthy, they alone ought to serve as authoritative for Christian faith and practice.⁹

The apparent strengths of Wesley's view of Scripture as examined thus far reveal only one dimension of his understanding of Scripture. A broader reading of Wesley is necessary in order to contextualize and nuance his view of Scripture. Specifically, Jones addresses two "qualifiers" to Wesley's notion of infallibility. The first concerns Wesley's rules for interpretation, and the second, his recognition of the possibility of misinterpretation due to human error.

Prerequisite to Wesley's rules for interpreting Scripture, however, are three attributes in the reader that he considered helpful for correctly interpreting Scripture: inspiration of the Holy Spirit, faith, and knowledge. Of the three, Wesley considered only one necessary, the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. In the Preface to his Explanatory Notes upon the Old Testament (1765) Wesley argued that "Scripture can only be understood through the same Spirit whereby it was given."¹⁰

Though Wesley nowhere provides an exhaustive list of his rules for interpreting Scripture, Jones compiles those rules to which Wesley makes

⁹ Jones, 23.

¹⁰ Jones, 105.

reference in various places throughout his writings:

1. Speak as the oracles of God.
2. Use the literal sense unless it contradicts another Scripture or implies an absurdity.
3. Interpret the text with regard to its literary context.
4. Scripture interprets Scripture, according to the analogy of faith and by parallel passages.
5. Commandments are covered promises.
6. Interpret literary devices appropriately.
7. Seek the most original text and the best translation.¹¹

Elaboration of Jones's entire list lies beyond the scope of this paper. However, I would like to extract one aspect from rule number four for additional consideration, namely the phrase "the analogy of faith."

Jones observes that Wesley, throughout the whole of his writings, "appeals to 'the whole of Scripture,' 'the whole tenor of Scripture', and 'the general tenor of Scripture.' . . . [Scripture] not only functions toward a single end, but it is throughout consistent and coherent. This can be seen in [Wesley's] appeal to a 'general tenor' of Scripture which should not be violated."¹² In his Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament Wesley translates Romans 12:6, "Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given us, whether it be prophesy, let us prophesy according to the analogy of faith; . . . [emphases Wesley's]." He comments on this verse as follows:

But it [the gift of prophecy] seems here to mean the ordinary gift of expounding Scripture. Let us prophesy according to the analogy of faith [emphasis in original]—St. Peter expresses it, 'as the oracles of God':

¹¹ Jones, 110.

¹² Jones, 43-44.

according to the general tenor of them; according to the grand scheme of doctrine that is delivered therein, touching original sin, justification by faith, and present, inward salvation.¹³

Wesley seems here to use “analogy of faith” as a way to rephrase “general tenor of Scripture.” Likewise, “original sin, justification by faith, and present, inward salvation” elaborates and clarifies what he means by “the grand scheme of doctrine that is delivered therein.” The implication for our understanding of rule four, then, is that Wesley’s “analogy of faith” is the criteria by which the plain, literal sense of a Scripture passage may be judged “absurd.” Said another way, for Wesley, his “analogy of faith” trumps the literal sense of a Scripture passage that contradicts it. Granted, Wesley understands the content of his “analogy of faith” to have emerged from his reading of Scripture.¹⁴ Nonetheless, it does become for him a Procrustean bed into which he makes all of Scripture fit. One prominent example of the way in which Wesley’s analogy of faith serves his purposes is in his controversy with Calvinists over predestination. Scripture passages which support predestination are declared absurd because they are contrary to a corollary of Wesley’s analogy of faith, namely that God desires all

¹³ Wesley, Explanatory Notes, 569-570.

¹⁴ Jones, 43-44. Jones provides a brief outline of the history of the phrase “analogy of faith” in which he traces the arguments of those who both agree and disagree with its use as a principle of interpretation. While some exegetes throughout history have considered it to be a given, others argue that it is simply another way of imposing a human construct upon the text.

to be saved and not an elect few.¹⁵

Jones gleans five aspects of Wesley's understanding of the "analogy of faith" from Wesley's comments on Romans 12:6: (1) Wesley believes that the Bible is a consistent whole from beginning to end; (2) it is the Bible's coherent, consistent doctrinal content that constitutes its wholeness; (3) it pertains to Wesley's ordo salutis—original sin, justification by faith, and present, inward salvation, which for him are "chief heads of that faith 'which was once delivered to the saints;'" (4) it functions both as a guide to correct theological conclusions and a preventative for incorrect ones; and, (5) it functions as the rule to be used in interpreting Scripture.¹⁶

Jones concludes that, with one exception—namely, his view of the wholeness of Scripture, Wesley's view of Scripture stands within the mainstream of Protestant theology. In particular, his understanding of "the analogy of faith" as constituted by the order of salvation distinguishes him from others.¹⁷

Tradition in John Wesley

Among modern interpreters are those who bemoan Wesley's Catholic tendency to supplement Scripture with tradition on one hand and his alleged

¹⁵ John Wesley, Sermon 110, "Free Grace," § 5, in Sermons III, vol. 3 of The Works of John Wesley, ed. Albert C. Outler, Bicentennial ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1986), 545.

¹⁶ Jones, 48-40.

¹⁷ Jones, 60.

unwillingness to allow tradition to correct his reading of Scripture on the other.¹⁸

Ted Campbell's John Wesley and Christian Antiquity attempts to contextualize and clarify the role of Christian antiquity in Wesley's thought. In Campbell's words,

John Wesley was born into an age in which Christian antiquity, far from being a subject of merely historical interest, had been a focal point for theological, ecclesiastical, and moral discourse for more than a century.¹⁹

Christian leaders contemporary with Wesley marshaled the writings of Christian antiquity both to defend their own beliefs and practices and to challenge their own culture. There was, however, disagreement over the appropriate scope and the role Christian antiquity. Roman Catholics revered antiquity as the first stage in an unbroken tradition of Christian belief and practice. Radical Reformers tended to disregard all post-canonical developments as corruptions. Magisterial Reformers respected the teachings of early Christian writers, especially Augustine, within the context of their emphasis on sola scriptura.²⁰

The Anglicanism of Wesley's time held that, because the church had remained relatively unspoiled for several centuries following the completion of the New Testament canon, it should have authority for the church in subsequent ages. This mediating position enabled Anglicans to utilize the teachings of the

¹⁸ Randy L. Maddox, Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 1994), 42.

¹⁹ Ted A. Campbell, John Wesley and Christian Antiquity: Religious Vision and Cultural Change (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 1991), 21.

²⁰ Campbell, John Wesley, 9-12.

pre-Constantinian church as vindication of their position in relation to both Puritanism on one side and Roman Catholicism on the other.²¹ John Wesley understood Christian antiquity, and especially pre-Constantinian Christian antiquity, to have been a manifestation of true or genuine Christianity as recorded in the New Testament.²² He tended to favor particular writers, especially Greek writers, over formal creeds. His reluctance to use the early creeds was due not so much to the content of their teaching as to their philosophical formulations and their polemic tone.²³ Wesley justified his appeal to early church writers on the basis of their proximity to biblical times, their eminent character, and a special endowment of the Holy Spirit upon them. He justified his restricting of authority to this period with his belief that the official status given to the church by Constantine precipitated its rapid degeneration.²⁴

John Wesley's first impetus to study Christian antiquity in the context of the founding theologians of Anglicanism may well have come from his parents, Samuel and Susanna. Samuel was rector of the parish at Epworth. Both he and Susanna were raised in the homes of Dissenting parents. Their conversion to the Church of England undoubtedly involved thoughtful engagement with those Anglican writers who had appealed to Christian antiquity in order to vindicate the

²¹ Campbell, John Wesley, 13.

²² Campbell, John Wesley, 5.

²³ Maddox, Responsible Grace, 42-43.

²⁴ Maddox, Responsible Grace, 43.

doctrines of the Church of England.²⁵ John's years at Oxford insured his continued engagement with the Anglicanism of his home. John's years at the university also brought him into contact with an Oxford society whose original purpose was the study of the New Testament and classical literature. However, the group's interests shifted towards the cultivation of piety, the re-institution of early Christian practices, and the renewal of the ancient Christians' moral and spiritual character.²⁶

The inspiration for John's study and work in Georgia was, in all likelihood, his vision of the renewal of ancient Christian practices and institutions in the primitive North American continent. However, his encounters with the Moravians led him to alter his conceptions of Christian antiquity.²⁷ As a result of their influence Wesley began to view Christian antiquity as a supplement to the authority of Scripture.²⁸ Though some scholars assert that Wesley lost interest in early Christianity after the beginning of the revival, Campbell contends that he continued "to study and refer to ancient Christian writings, and to call upon them in the work of the revival movement itself."²⁹

Wesley's continued reliance upon Christian antiquity can be seen in the

²⁵ Campbell, John Wesley, 23, 25-26.

²⁶ Campbell, John Wesley, 27.

²⁷ Campbell, John Wesley, 37.

²⁸ Campbell, John Wesley, 40.

²⁹ Campbell, John Wesley, 41.

influence of Clement of Alexandria's description of the Christian ideal upon Wesley's tract, "The Character of a Methodist" (1742).³⁰ When Wesley and his movement were charged with enthusiasm because of his teachings regarding divine assurance and inspiration, he defended the Methodist movement by appealing to similar claims made by early Christians. Wesley appealed to the teachings of the ancient church to justify the change in his attitude toward episcopacy and ordination. When in 1749 Wesley began to reach out to other evangelical leaders in order to secure greater cooperation, he turned to Christian antiquity as common ground for ecumenical discussions.³¹

As was mentioned at the outset of this paper, Scott Jones suggested expanding the Quadrilateral from four to five sources by distinguishing between Christian antiquity and the Church of England.³² The suggestion is not without justification. Wesley's high view of Anglicanism is due in large measure to his opinion that it was not only "the most scriptural national church in the world," but followed the primitive church "in most points."³³

In his personal memoir's Wesley's acknowledges that prior to 1737 he

³⁰ John Wesley, "The Character of a Methodist" (1742), in The Methodist Societies: History, Nature, and Design, vol. 9 of The Works of John Wesley, ed. Rupert E. Davies, Bicentennial ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989), 31.

³¹ Campbell, John Wesley, 43-44.

³² Jones, 60.

³³ John Wesley, Sermon 13, "On Sin in Believers," § I.3, in Sermons I, vol. 1 of The Works of John Wesley, ed. Albert C. Outler, Bicentennial ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1984), 317-18.

erroneously regarded Christian antiquity as a “coordinate” rather than a “subordinate” rule with Scripture. He indicated that after 1737 he regarded scripture as having a normative authority over any other source of Christian authority, including Christian antiquity.³⁴ Nonetheless, Wesley continued to ascribe effective authority to ancient Christian writers: (1) as interpreters of Scripture;³⁵ (2) as examples of scriptural standards for teaching, practice, and morality; (3) as suggestive of Christian practices and teaching which, though not specifically prescribed by scripture were nonetheless agreeable with scripture; and, (4) as appeals to confirm Methodist practices and teachings.³⁶ Though Wesley came to acknowledge the error of his overly-idealized vision of the early church, he still viewed the ancient Christianity as a model for church renewal in his own age.³⁷

Reason in John Wesley

The period of history in which Wesley lived is sometimes know as the

³⁴ Outler, ed., John Wesley, 46.

³⁵ John Wesley, “A Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion, Part I” (1745), in The Appeals to Men of Reason and Religion and Certain Related Open Letters, vol. 11 of The Works of John Wesley, ed. Gerald R. Cragg, Oxford ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975).

³⁶ John Wesley, “Plain Account of the People Called Methodists” (1749), in The Methodist Societies: History, Nature, and Design, vol. 9 of The Works of John Wesley, ed. Rupert E. Davies, Bicentennial ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989).

³⁷ John Wesley, Sermon 38, “A Caution Against Bigotry,” § II.3, in Sermons 2, vol. 2 of The Works of John Wesley, ed. Albert Outler, Bicentennial ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1985), 69-70.

Enlightenment. The same period is also described by historians as “The Age of Reason.” He and his contemporaries place a great deal of confidence in this faculty, but unlike some of his contemporaries, Wesley also acknowledged its limits.³⁸ Reason was second only to Scripture as a criterion Wesley invoked to defend the Christian authenticity of a belief or practice of his Methodist movement. As Randy Maddox observed, “it was more typical for him [Wesley] to refer to Scripture and reason conjoined than to Scripture alone.”³⁹ Interestingly, when Wesley speaks of Scripture or reason, he does so to affirm that he will abide by either. He is able to make such an assertion because it is his conviction that there can be no conflict between faith and reason. For Wesley, a fully rational person would find clear proof that the Scriptures are “of God.” How does he arrive at such a conclusion? A rational person’s ability to arrive at reasonable conclusions is dependent upon the possession of accurate data. Accurate data is dependent upon the complete functioning of the senses. Wesley argues that the “natural senses” may, at best, provide accurate but incomplete data. Natural senses can perceive natural data, but they cannot perceive spiritual data. Only when one’s “spiritual senses” have been enlivened can one perceive both natural and spiritual data. Without the “spiritual senses” any conclusions are

³⁸ Jones, 67.

³⁹ Maddox, Responsible Grace, 40.

base upon incomplete data and, therefore, subject to error.⁴⁰

Frequently Wesley uses the disjunction Scripture or reason and says that he will abide by the conclusions of either. In the published Letter to the Author of "The Enthusiasm of Methodists and Papists Compared," he writes, "I am not above either reason or Scripture. To either of these I am ready to submit." He even goes so far as to say that if given sufficiently weighty arguments, he will give up Christianity.⁴¹

The frequency of reason as a topic in Wesley's writings is due in large measure to the fact that perhaps the most frequent charge leveled against him and his movement was that of enthusiasm.⁴² Why did Wesley consider the accusation of enthusiasm so potentially damaging that it merited so much of his attention? Maddox identifies two major emphases of the Enlightenment relative to theological method:

(1) the rejection of sole reliance on traditional authority in truth-claims, requiring some (present) rational or empirical justification for all knowledge; and (2) the scorning of all appeals to mystery or miracle, or to enthusiastic (i.e., nonrational) avenues to truth. In an extreme form, such commitments led to the rejection of special revelation, or to its reduction

⁴⁰ John Wesley, "An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion" (1743), § 32, in The Appeals to Men of Reason and Religion and Certain Related Open Letters, vol. 11 of The Works of John Wesley, ed. Gerald R. Cragg, Oxford ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 56.

⁴¹ John Wesley, "A Letter to the Author of The Enthusiasm of Methodists, &c.", in The Appeals to Men of Reason and Religion and Certain Related Open Letters, vol. 11 of The Works of John Wesley, ed. Gerald R. Cragg, Oxford ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 370.

⁴² Jones, 67.

into a mere reiteration of the “eternal truths of reason.”⁴³

While Wesley affirmed much of the Enlightenment spirit, he also affirmed the possibility of special revelation, which ran counter to Enlightenment norms. As a result, he was constantly laboring to strike a balance between two extremes, both of which he rejected—antirational Christian enthusiasm on one hand and antsupernatural Enlightenment rationalism on the other. Maddox contends, however, that Wesley was more concerned about the rejection of reason than its exaltation.⁴⁴

Wesley’s Oxford education provided him with an attractive alternative to both of these extremes. Enlightenment empiricism denied that reason was the source of knowledge—this in contrast to Plato or Descartes. Rather, experience was the source of knowledge, and reason was a processor on knowledge.⁴⁵ As result, the conflict between reason and revelation as sources of knowledge was overcome. It was within this context that Wesley could claim religious experience and belief to be the raw material necessary for reason to perform its function. In his sermon “The Case of Reason Impartially Considered” Wesley proposes three definitions of reason, the first two of which are argument and eternal reason. It is his third definition upon which he builds his understanding of reason

⁴³ Maddox, Responsible Grace, 40.

⁴⁴ John Wesley, Sermon 70, “The Case of Reason Impartially Considered,” § II.10, in Sermons 2, vol. 2 of The Works of John Wesley, ed. Albert Outler, Bicentennial ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1985), 599.

⁴⁵ Maddox, Responsible Grace, 40.

in the strict sense:

In another acceptation of the word, reason is much the same with understanding. It means a faculty of the human soul; that faculty which exerts itself in three ways: by simple apprehension, by judgment, and by discourse. Simple apprehension is barely conceiving a thing in the mind, the first and most simple act of understanding. Judgment is the determining that the things before conceived either agree with or differ from each other. Discourse (strictly speaking) is the motion of the progress of the mind from one judgment to another. The faculty of the soul which includes these three operations I here mean by the term reason [emphases Wesley's].⁴⁶

Reason was, in Wesley's words, "the candle of the Lord,"⁴⁷ a gift given that we might properly respond to revelation. Wesley contrasted his words with the assertions of enthusiasts by pointing out that his interpretations and applications of God's gracious revelation in nature and Scripture were responsible (i.e., publicly defensible).⁴⁸ The proper role of reason in relation to religion, then, was a matter of recognizing the point beyond which reason ceased to function in its proper role as interpreter of revelation by seeking to establish itself as an independent norm. For Wesley, Scripture was always the main warrant to which reason must appeal.⁴⁹

Wesley determined the proper role of reason in relation to religion by

⁴⁶ Wesley, Sermon 70, "The Case of Reason Impartially Considered," § I.2, in Works, 2:590.

⁴⁷ Wesley, Sermon 70, "The Case of Reason Impartially Considered," § II:10, in Works, 2:599.

⁴⁸ Maddox, Responsible Grace, 40-41.

⁴⁹ Maddox, Responsible Grace, 41.

establishing what reason could and could not do. Reason was of undeniable value in “the affairs of common life”—among those who labor on the land, who run a household, who excel in the arts, who practice law or medicine. Further, reason is of great assistance among those who labor in the arts and sciences—in grammar, logic, the various realms that comprise mathematics and philosophy. It is an absolute necessity for those who would contribute to good governance at every level. Finally, Wesley acknowledged that reason could “do exceeding much, both with regard to the foundation . . . , and the superstructure” of religion. For all of its benefits, however, reason cannot produce faith, hope, or the love or neighbor, in the scriptural senses of the words. And

as it cannot give either faith, hope, love, or virtue, so it cannot give happiness, since separate from these there can be no happiness for any intelligent creature. It is true, those who are void of all virtue may have pleasures such as they are; but happiness they have not, cannot have.⁵⁰

In summary, the role of reason in theology for Wesley, though significant, was secondary. Maddox points out that though “such a limited role for reason in theology must have seemed anemic to the rationalism of Wesley’s day (and of ours). . . . it is quite amenable with contemporary nonfoundationalism and the attempt to recover theology as a practical discipline.”⁵¹

⁵⁰ Wesley, “The Case of Reason Impartially Considered,” §§ II:1-10, in Works, 2:593-600.

⁵¹ Maddox, Responsible Grace, 41-42. Outler comments that “With this ‘fourth dimension’ [i.e., reason], one might say, Wesley was trying to incorporate the notion of conversion into the Anglican tradition.” See Outler, “Wesleyan Quadrilateral—In John Wesley,” 79.

Experience in John Wesley

Prior to Wesley, few Anglican discussions of the sources of doctrinal judgment addressed the possible role of experience. For the most part such discussions were limited to the roles of Scripture, reason, and antiquity. This acknowledgment and elevation of the role of experience was one of Wesley's contributions.⁵²

The significant emphasis on experience as a source of knowledge in the eighteenth-century was due in large measure to John Locke's Essay on Human Understanding. Locke's essay represented a revival of an ancient concept, namely, that all of our ideas are based on experience. Wesley's thinking reflected this emphasis on the role of experience. Though Wesley did on occasion use the word "experience" to refer to a common body of knowledge that was readily available to everyone, his primary reference was to religious experience. His own encounters with the Puritan and Pietist emphases on one's individual experience of God became, in his thought, an authority for Christian theology. "Religious experience was, for Wesley, as objective a reality as sensory experience was for Locke. Thus, he also referred to it in universal terms," but only for those who believe. This is a logical extension of Wesley's understanding of "spiritual senses."⁵³

Wesley resorted to the testimony of experience as a means of testing his

⁵² Maddox, Responsible Grace, 41-42.

⁵³ Jones, 94-95.

distinctive interpretations of Scripture that were being challenged by others. For example, is a sense of assurance essential to justification, and do believers continue to struggle with an inclination to sin?⁵⁴ Another distinctively Wesleyan doctrine for which experience was a primary validating criterion was the issue of whether God works entire sanctification gradually or instantaneously. Since Wesley understood Scripture to be silent on the issue, he resorted to experience, not in the sense of an individual's feelings but in an analysis of "the objective realities of Christian life."⁵⁵

While, on one hand, Wesley speaks of religious experiences that are readily available in the present, on the other hand, he speaks of religious experiences as goals. Those experiences that are readily available serve to confirm the truths of Scripture in the life of a believer. In his sermon on "The Witness of the Spirit, I" Wesley affirms the role of experience in the believer's assurance of salvation. He writes,

. . . so many . . . texts, with the experience of all real Christians, sufficiently evince that there is in every believer both the testimony of God's Spirit, and the testimony of his own, that he is a child of God.⁵⁶

Experience also confirms Scripture's teaching that salvation is both

⁵⁴ Henry D. Rack, Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism (London: Epworth Press, 2002), 385.

⁵⁵ Maddox, Responsible Grace, 46.

⁵⁶ John Wesley, Sermon 10, "The Witness of the Spirit, I," § 1.1, in Sermons 1, vol. 1 of The of John Wesley, ed. Albert Outler, Bicentennial ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1984), 271.

instantaneous and gradual.⁵⁷ Later in the same sermon, while emphasizing the necessity of holding together the two truths “Without me you can do nothing” (John 15:5) and “I can do all things through Christ who strengtheneth me” (Philippians 4:13), Wesley writes, “. . . let us remember that God has joined these together in the experience of every believer.”⁵⁸ Those religious experiences that Wesley speaks of as goals serve to verify the promises contained in the theology of his preaching. He writes in A Plain Account of Genuine Christianity:

So Christianity tells me and so I find it. May every real Christian say, “I now am assured that these things are so; I experienced them in my own breast. What Christianity (considered as a doctrine) promised, is accomplished in my soul.” And Christianity, considered as an inward principle, is the completion of all those promises. It is holiness and happiness, the image of God impressed upon a created spirit; a fountain of peace and love springing up into everlasting life.⁵⁹

Wesley’s understanding of the role of experience also includes a decidedly corporate dimension. The experiences to which he appeals are not without corroboration. In “The Witness of the Spirit, II” he writes:

And here, properly, comes into confirm this scriptural doctrine the experience of the children of God, the experience not of two or three, not

⁵⁷ John Wesley, Sermon 85, “On Working Out Our Own Salvation,” § II.1, in Sermons 3, vol. 3 of The Works of John Wesley, ed. Albert Outler, Bicentennial ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1986), 204.

⁵⁸ Wesley, “On Working Out Our Own Salvation,” §§ III.5-6, in Works, 3:208.

⁵⁹ John Wesley, “A Plain Account of Genuine Christianity,” § II.12, in John Wesley, ed. Albert Outler, 191.

of a few, but of a great multitude which no man can number.⁶⁰

In summarizing Wesley's appeal to experience in doctrinal decisions, Randy Maddox characterizes experience as "typically an external, long-term, communal reality." The subjects of Wesley's observations included his own life, the lives of his Methodist people, and human life in general.⁶¹

The closest Wesley ever appeared to have come to formulating a doctrinal claim based on experience was his treatise The Doctrine of Original Sin, later distilled into the sermon "Original Sin."⁶² The sermon begins with a survey of the universal human sinfulness of humankind before the flood and then asks in Section 2 whether humankind is the same now. Using the threefold condemnation of 1 John 2:16—"the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life"—as his outline, Wesley records his observations of the world in which he lives and maintains that daily experience confirms his affirmation of universal human sinfulness in his own time. However, he then acknowledges that his observations and conclusions would not necessarily be shared by those who have not been regenerated by God's grace. This rhetorical ploy demonstrates that, appearances to the contrary, this sermon is not an inductive

⁶⁰ John Wesley, Sermon 11, "Witness of the Spirit, II," § III.6, in Sermons I, vol. 1 of The Works of John Wesley, ed. Albert Outler, Bicentennial ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1984), 290.

⁶¹ Maddox, Responsible Grace, 46.

⁶² John Wesley, Sermon 44, "Original Sin," in Sermons II, vol. 2 of The Works of John Wesley, ed. Albert Outler, Bicentennial ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1985), 172-85.

formulation of a doctrine based upon human observation and experience. In point of fact, Wesley shaped the entire sermon to fit his preconceived agenda, namely to refute the deists' denial of the doctrine of original sin by demonstrating their very denial to be an evidence of original sin.⁶³

For Wesley, experience was not an autonomous authority that stood in contrast or opposition to Scripture—or tradition for that matter. Rather, contemporary Christian experience was to be held in constant dialogue with those whose experiences were the content of Scripture and tradition. It was, in Randy Maddox's words, "Wesley's overall practice of making the ongoing life of the Christian community the typical goad, a fruitful guide, and the ultimate goal of his doctrinal reflection [emphases in original]."⁶⁴

John Wesley's "heart-warming experience" of May 24, 1738, is one of numerous examples of his putting into practice what twentieth-century United Methodists have named the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. In a nutshell, he tested his experience against the experiences of others; he exercised his reason upon the raw data provided by this multiplicity of experiences; and he found support for his own experience and the experiences of others in Scripture as well as in both pre-Constantinian and Anglican tradition.⁶⁵

⁶³ Randy Maddox, "The Enriching Role of Experience," in Wesley and the Quadrilateral: Renewing the Conversation, by Stephen Gunter et al. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1997), 114.

⁶⁴ Maddox, "Enriching Role of Experience," 127.

⁶⁵ Outler, "Wesleyan Quadrilateral," 79.

CHAPTER 5

The Wesleyan Quadrilateral—Then and Now

This chapter will begin with a brief recapitulation of the thesis and the findings of chapters 1-5 in order to highlight the proposals upon which the remainder of this dissertation will build. This recapitulation will be followed by a “conversation” between contemporary understandings of the Quadrilateral and Wesley’s use of the contemporary Quadrilateral’s constitutive elements.

Recapitulation

For the most part, current discussions regarding the Wesleyan Quadrilateral have been confined to the arenas of Wesleyan theology and history. This dissertation is arguing that conversations regarding the Wesleyan Quadrilateral may profitably be expanded and relocated beyond the province of Wesleyan history and theology and into the realm of Christian education. Though the concept has become a part of United Methodist identity, implications of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral for Christian education have remained largely unexamined—not only in terms of content but perhaps more importantly in terms of process.

The first five chapters of this dissertation presented an overview of the historical-theological context within which this discussion of the Quadrilateral takes place. Chapter 1, the Introduction, situated the Wesleyan Quadrilateral

within the context of the faith journey of the author of this dissertation. Chapter 2 examined primary documents relating to the origin of the phrase Wesleyan Quadrilateral and argued that those who coined the phrase had in mind a dynamic and fluid understanding of the interrelationship among the four elements. Chapter 3 surveyed the terrain of contemporary discussions of the Quadrilateral in order to argue that, since the introduction of the concept of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral in the late 1960s and its subsequent growth in prominence as a distinctive of United Methodism, the dynamic interrelationship among Scripture and the other three elements of the Quadrilateral has been either neglected or distorted. Neglected in the sense that, while the Quadrilateral is introduced and addressed in both Confirmation and Ordination, there is virtually no curriculum resource available by which to transmit the concept and its potential usefulness (as well as its admitted potential for misunderstanding and misuse) to adult laity. Distorted in the sense that, even though Scripture itself provides numerous examples of interaction among the elements of Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience, Scripture is often treated as though its influence were hermetically sealed from interaction with tradition, experience, and reason in the lives of contemporary Christians. Chapter 4 examined selected writings of John Wesley to demonstrate that, insofar as the elements of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral do, in fact, resonate with John Wesley, their appropriation by Wesley was not uniformly isolated, static, hierarchical, and informational but rather holistic, dynamic, interactive, conversational, and

transformational.

The Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Then and Now

To what degree do words used by Wesley in his eighteenth-century context retain their same meanings in our twenty- and twenty-first century context? Does the phrase “Wesleyan Quadrilateral” clarify our understandings, or does it contribute to their distortion? To what degree does the metaphor, “Wesleyan Quadrilateral,” contribute to the re-shaping, rather than the re-capturing Wesley’s meanings? How might the foregoing discussion help us get “behind” contemporary discussions of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral in order to assess their accuracy in representing Wesley? The remainder of this chapter will attempt a synthesis of observations made thus far in order to set the stage for the discussion of a new understanding of the Quadrilateral which will follow.

The number and complexity of potential issues that could be addressed at this point is far-ranging and beyond the scope of this dissertation. The three issues addressed below are selected because of their direct relevance to the focus of this paper, namely, the relocation of discussions regarding the Wesleyan Quadrilateral beyond the terrain of history and theology and into the realm of Christian education.

The first issue pertains to the impact and accuracy of the twentieth-century metaphor–quadrilateral. I begin with the metaphor quadrilateral because, in my opinion, it has re-shaped Wesley’s methodology as much, if not more than it has re-captured it. As others have noted, Albert Outler himself,

writing in 1985, lamented the way in which the phrase had been misconstrued and expressed regrets for having coined it.¹ The document in which the word first appeared, The Theological Study Commission on Doctrine and Doctrinal Standards, uses the word only once: "In this quadrilateral of 'standards,' Scripture stands foremost without a rival."² Other terminology used in the same document makes clear that the primary characteristic intended by the term was interdependency, not separability: "a four-element compound of interdependent norms."³

The word "quadrilateral" has been uniformly—as far as I observed—taken in a geometrical sense, and characteristics of geometry have been retrojected back into the Wesley corpus, creating a clash of two worlds—theological and geometrical. One clear example, as has already been mentioned, is found in the title of the article by Robert Tuttle, "The Wesleyan Quadrilateral—Not Equilateral!"⁴ The language of geometry suggests that Wesley's use of Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience are clearly defined, easily identifiable, quantifiable, mutually exclusive, and impermeable. The issue of scriptural primacy will be addressed later in more detail. However, the certainty with which people speak of scriptural primacy—as if it were unalloyed by tradition,

¹ Outler, "Wesleyan Quadrilateral," 80, 86.

² UMC, Interim Report, 8.

³ UMC, Interim Report, 7.

⁴ Tuttle, 19-25.

reason, and experience—suggests that they may be speaking from a geometrical perspective. Jones's ranking of the sources of authority in descending order of importance is, perhaps, another manifestation of a geometrical mindset.⁵ To think geometrically when hearing the word “quadrilateral” is, perhaps, unavoidable. Moreover, the phrase “Wesleyan Quadrilateral” has become a part of United Methodist mythology (to adapt the language of Ted Campbell),⁶ and trying to remove it from United Methodist conversation would be akin to attempting to un-ring a bell! However, the metaphor has been a mixed blessing and has undoubtedly done as much to re-shape our understanding of Wesley as it has to re-capture his own understandings.

A second issue that emerges out of these discussions is that of Wesley's conception and use of Scripture. Wesley's statements regarding Scripture provide fodder for his spiritual ancestors at almost every point on the theological spectrum. On one hand, as a homo unius libri, “a man of one book,” he could declare Scripture to be the sole authority in determining Christian belief and practice.⁷ However, as one contemporary Wesley scholar cautions, “It would be

⁵ Jones, John Wesley's Conception and Use of Scripture. See especially his chapter entitled “The Authority of Scripture in Tension with Other Authorities,” 62-103.

⁶ Campbell, “Wesleyan Quadrilateral’.”

⁷ John Wesley, “The Character of a Methodist” (1742), in The Methodist Societies: History, Nature, and Design, vol. 9 of The Works of John Wesley, ed. Rupert E. Davies, Bicentennial ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989), 33-34.

a mistake to confuse Wesley's prolific use of Scripture in doctrinal matters with naive biblicism. He lived during the beginnings of the critical study of Scripture and was exposed to its methods and results during his training at Oxford."⁸ On the other hand, Wesley could respond sharply to preachers who, in protest against the reading demands he placed upon them, contended they need read only the Bible:

Then you ought to teach others to read only the Bible, and, by parity of reason, to hear only the Bible: But if so, you need preach no more. . . . This is rank enthusiasm. If you need no book but the Bible, you are got above St. Paul. He wanted others too. "Bring the Books," says he, "but especially the parchments," those wrote on parchment. "But I have no taste for reading." Contract a taste for it by use, or return to your trade.⁹

The issue of scriptural primacy in contemporary discussions of the quadrilateral seems to lobby on behalf of the position that all theological insights should flow from Scripture and that the other three elements simply ratify or clarify the plain meaning of Scripture. As has been observed above, Wesley's implementation of tradition, reason, and experience in relation to Scripture allows them "both voice and vote," if you will, especially when the passage in question does not bear directly upon "the general tenor of Scripture" as exemplified by Wesley's understanding of the analogy of faith.¹⁰

The testimony of reason will suffice as one example. In his sermon "The

⁸ Maddox, Responsible Grace, 37.

⁹ Jones, 34-35, quoting Wesley's Large Minutes, in Works (Jackson), CD-ROM ed.

¹⁰ Jones, 43-53. See also Sermon 110, "Free Grace," § 20, Works, 3:552.

Love of God” Wesley wrote that “. . . if the literal sense of these Scriptures were absurd, and apparently contrary to reason, then we should be obliged not to interpret them according to the letter, but to look out for a looser meaning.”¹¹ The pivotal question, of course, is, By what criteria does one determine an absurdity? Unlike latter-day fundamentalists, for whom the slightest hint of disagreement between Scripture and science requires either forced harmonization of the two or the rejection of scientific outcomes, Wesley readily yielded to science in areas not affecting his analogy of faith.¹² Jones observes that, for Wesley, “It is reason based on experience that must decide whether something is absurd or not. . . . Conceivably, Wesley is prepared to adjust many things in the Scripture to modern scientific discoveries.” Wesley’s rejection of the Ptolemaic cosmology of Scripture is the specific example to which Jones refers.¹³

Among the more rancorous debates within church and society today are those related to recent scientific discoveries, for example, in the area of genetic research. How would Wesley respond to such scientific discoveries in relation to his interpretation of Scripture? And what about discoveries made in the various social sciences? Would, or should, Wesley—and his latter-day followers—“be

¹¹ John Wesley, Sermon 144, “The Love of God,” in Sermons IV, vol. 4 of The Works of John Wesley, ed. Albert Outler, Bicentennial ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1987), 377.

¹² George M. Marsden, Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth Century Evangelicalism, 1870-1925 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 55-62.

¹³ Jones, 79-80.

prepared to adjust many things in the Scripture to modern scientific discoveries"?¹⁴

A third issue in contemporary understandings of Wesley's use of the elements of the Quadrilateral concerns two very different understandings of the word "experience." Contemporary understandings of the word "experience" tend to include an almost limitless range of physical or psychic encounters. Such experiences are considered self-authenticating and are, therefore, imported into the quadrilateral as an authority to be given equal weight with Scripture, tradition, and reason—all in the name or spirit of Wesley. While one may certainly choose to argue such an understanding of experience in the context of discussions about the Quadrilateral, there can be no doubt that Wesley's understanding and use of the word "experience" was drastically different. It is extraordinarily significant that among Wesley's most extensive discussions of experience are his two sermons entitled "The Witness of the Spirit, 1 and 2." It is religious experience, or better, experience of the Spirit, to which Wesley refers. The topics addressed by these sermons lie at the heart of Wesley's soteriological understanding of the analogy of faith. In neither case is experience the measure of Scripture. Rather, in both cases Wesley uses Scripture to qualify or disqualify ostensibly religious experiences.¹⁵

¹⁴ Jones, 79-80.

¹⁵ John Wesley, Sermons 10 and 11, "The Witness of the Spirit, 1 and 2," in Sermons 1, vol. 1 of The Works of John Wesley, Albert Outler, ed., Bicentennial ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1984), 267-98.

Awareness of the socio-religious context within which these sermons were written is also helpful in understanding them properly. Wesley is responding to accusations of enthusiasm against Methodists made by Deists of his day. Their complaint was not that Methodists had experiences, in a naturalistic sense of the word. Their complaint was that Methodists claimed to have experiences whose author was the Spirit of God. Against this complaint Wesley countered, first of all, by acknowledging that there were counterfeit claims of having experienced the Spirit of God. In taking this tack he sided with the Deists in their accusations. However, Wesley claimed that the proof of the matter was not in the words of the professors but in the words of Scripture (thus affirming the possibility of authentic experiences of the Spirit against the Deists) and in the actions of the professors (thus distancing himself and his movement from the discrediting actions of false professors).

Another dimension of experience in Wesley's writings has to do with outward evidences in the life of a believer that confirm the promises of Scripture. Those who do not have daily, experiential confirmation of Scripture have not been spiritually awakened. However, once their spiritual senses are awakened they will see not only their own sinfulness and that of all humanity, they will also see the Spirit's work within themselves and others. Because the salvation to which Scripture is our guide can be experienced, experience that is consistent with Scripture's teaching also becomes the goal for the life of faith. Thus, for Wesley, the experience of growth in holy living is not only an assurance of the

Spirit's presence and of the reliability of the promises of Scripture; it is also a goal to which believers may aspire in their journey toward perfect love.¹⁶

While the testimony of experience is for Wesley predominantly positive, his affirmation of the positive value of experience is not without qualification. In his response to one who challenged his perceived unqualified affirmation of inward experiences Wesley wrote, "Neither in writing, in preaching, nor in private conversation have I ever 'taught any of my followers to depend upon them [inward feelings] as sure guides or infallible proofs' of anything."¹⁷ Similarly, with regard to supposed physical experiences, Wesley wrote in his Journal for September 6, 1742,

I then heard each of them relate her experience at large. I afterwards examined them severally touching the circumstances which I did not understand; on which I then talked with several others also. And thus far I approved of their experience (because agreeable to the written Word) as to their feeling [emphasis in original] the work of the Spirit of God, in peace and joy and love. But as to what some of them said farther concerning feeling the blood of Christ running upon their arms . . . I plainly told them . . . that some [emphasis in original] of these circumstances might be from God . . . but that all the rest I must believe to be the mere, empty dreams of an heated imagination.¹⁸

¹⁶ Jones, 179-182.

¹⁷ John Wesley, "Second Letter to the Author of The Enthusiasm of Methodists, &c.," in The Appeals to Men of Reason and Religion and Certain Related Open Letters, vol. 11 of The Works of John Wesley, ed. Gerald R. Cragg, Oxford ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 399.

¹⁸ John Wesley, Journals and Diaries, vol. 19 of The Works of John Wesley, ed. W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater, Bicentennial ed., (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1990), 295-96.

Conclusions

Our examination of the elements of the Quadrilateral has demonstrated that contemporary discussions tend to treat the term “Quadrilateral” geometrically. As a consequence, contemporary discussions tend to treat the elements of the Quadrilateral as both distinguishable and separable. However, an understanding of the term that is conversational and testimonial not only suggests a more authentic representation of Wesley’s dynamically interdependent application of the Quadrilateral’s constituent elements, but it also opens the way for a broader application of its insights into other areas, including Christian education. Contemporary discussions tend uncritically to emphasize Wesley’s “high” view of Scripture without fully considering the implications of either his analogy of faith as a controlling presupposition or his ready willingness to defer to science in those areas not directly related to his understanding of the analogy of faith. Contemporary discussions tend to commend Wesley for his reliance upon tradition as a sentinel for orthodoxy without acknowledging the subjectivity he displayed in selecting those authors from Christian antiquity who confirmed his biases. Finally, contemporary discussions both appropriate and react against a broad understanding of the word “experience” that is much more general and all-inclusive than Wesley’s use of the term within the narrow context of religion.

In contrast to these recent tendencies, this dissertation’s conversational approach to the Quadrilateral understands the four witnesses of the

Quadrilateral to be radically interdependent, distinguishable but inseparable. It understands Wesley's "high" view of Scripture not as literalistic in the sense of latter-day fundamentalism but as subservient to his over-arching understanding of the primacy of the analogy of faith. This will prove to be especially significant for our willingness to enter into meaningful dialogue with the findings of contemporary scientific research. In recognition of and contrast to Wesley's highly selective and subjective appropriation of tradition, our conversational approach to the Quadrilateral will consciously engage a much broader cross-section of Christian traditions. Finally, in contrast to contemporary tendencies selectively both to appropriate and react against Wesley's narrow understanding of experience, our conversational approach will apply contemporary distinctions as a means to clarify his word "experience" for use in our twenty-first century context.

Part 2

Relocating the Quadrilateral

CHAPTER 6

Relocating the Wesleyan Quadrilateral: New Understandings

This section will begin the process of relocating the Wesleyan Quadrilateral from the realms of theology and history into the realms of Christian educational pedagogy and faith formation. We will consider some of the implications of changing the metaphor's location from the realm of geometry to the realm of conversation, as in bi-lateral negotiations, tri-lateral conversations, etc. Terms that emerged out of the geometrical understanding of the Quadrilateral have been demonstrated to contribute to a hierarchical, segmented approach to its constituent parts. By contrast, a conversational understanding of the metaphor suggests changes in nomenclature. Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience are no longer parts, quadrants, or sources. They are, rather, voices, testimonies, and witnesses. The changes in nomenclature are not merely superficial. Changed nomenclature has the potential to transform how we think about the interactions among the various witnesses. Instead of clamoring for primacy, the four witness of the Quadrilateral engage in what we might call "Christian conference," a phrase used by Wesley and considered by him to be an instituted means of grace along with prayer, searching the Scripture, the

Lord's Supper, and fasting.¹ Instead of four mutually exclusive segments, sources, or authorities, the four witnesses are both transformed and transforming in their conversational give-and-take with one another.

The intent of this changed understanding is not to deny the uniqueness of each of the four witnesses within the Quadrilateral; they are clearly distinguishable. Nor is the intent of this changed understanding to demote Scripture; it retains its role as the sole primary witness to Christianity's constitutive historical events as affirmed by Church tradition. Rather the intent is, rather, to establish the inseparability of the four witnesses, to affirm the rich dynamism that is lost when each is treated in isolation, and to elevate the importance of the testimonies of tradition, reason, and experience in relation to Scripture. Relocating the Quadrilateral to the arena of Christian education and faith formation and acknowledging the mutual give-and-take among the four witnesses invites a corresponding re-examination of the dynamics of Christian education and faith formation—not only content but also process, not only information but also conversation and collaboration, not only analysis but also synthesis, not only theory but also incarnation.

¹ John Wesley, "Minutes of Several Conversations between the Rev. Mr. Wesley and Others" (1744-1789), in The Works of John Wesley, ed. Thomas Jackson, 14 vols., CD-Rom edition (Franklin, TN: Providence House, 2005), 8, 322-24; hereafter cited as Works (Jackson). See also Colin W. Williams, John Wesley's Theology Today: A Study of the Wesleyan Tradition in the Light of Current Theological Dialogue (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1960), 132-36; and Randy Maddox, Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 1994), 212-13.

Since, by definition, a testimony is made in the present to a situation involving persons, places, objects, or events that occurred in the past, this section will consider the importance of distinguishing between a testimony and its referent, especially as such distinctions relate to our relocating of the Quadrilateral. As our discussion of the distinction between testimony and referent moves in the direction of a distinction between means and source, we will explore the notions of means of grace and sacrament in relation to the four testimonies of the Quadrilateral. Finally, our discussion of means of grace in relation to the Quadrilateral leads to consideration of the Holy Spirit as the source of the grace for which the testimonies of the Quadrilateral function as means.

The remainder of this chapter will briefly explore some of the implications of the Quadrilateral's relocation for an enriched understanding of its four testimonies. Then we will consider some of the unique contributions to Christian education and faith formation which arise from this approach to the Quadrilateral.

Relocating the Metaphor

As was observed in the previous chapter, the word "quadrilateral" has been understood almost exclusively in a geometrical sense, and characteristics of geometry have been retrojected back into the Wesley corpus. The result has been a clash of those two worlds—theological and geometrical. The word quadrilateral, however, contains potential for expanding the "location" of the

conversations beyond the confines of geometry. The second half of the compound word, “-lateral,” when preceded by “tri-” or “bi-,” is sometimes used to refer to conversations, negotiations, or agreements—for example, “Trilateral Commission” or “bilateral negotiations.” Thinking of the four elements that comprise the Wesleyan Quadrilateral in terms of a quadrilateral conversation, rather than a geometrical figure, has the potential to change the way we think about and talk about the issue.

Relocating the Quadrilateral metaphor from geometry to conversation or communication also opens the way for related changes in vocabulary. Rather than the word quadrant, with its suggestion of clearly identifiable, impermeable, rigid boundaries, the four components of the Quadrilateral may be identified as testimonies, witnesses, or voices; i.e., the testimony of Scripture, the witness of tradition, the voice of reason, etc. This conversational terminology also serves to underscore the importance of a dynamic, participatory, process-oriented theological methodology, as opposed to a one-way monologue. The goal of such a process-oriented methodology is the eliciting of facts, not for the purpose of accumulating knowledge, but for the purpose of increasing faith, repentance, and holiness of heart and life; i.e., religious experience. While Wesley was insistent upon Scripture (properly interpreted) as the final arbiter of authentic religious experience, he was not as insistent that Scripture be either the sole source or means of authentic religious experience.

The location within which one understands the Quadrilateral will have a

profound impact upon its thorough-going appropriation in the area of Christian education. Understood as theological sources, guidelines, norms, or content-areas, the role of the four elements of the Quadrilateral for Christian education—including even the experience quadrant—becomes primarily cognitive and informational. However, inherent in the alternative understanding of the Quadrilateral proposed by this dissertation, an understanding that takes seriously all four dimensions or testimonies as means for the efficacious agency of the Holy Spirit, is a pedagogy for faith formation in general and a Wesleyan approach to Christian education in particular that takes into account issues of both content and process.

Relocating the Quadrilateral from the realm of geometry into the realm of conversation as I have suggested makes room for acknowledging the primacy of the Spirit over the elements of the quadrilateral (as will be discussed below). Such a relocation also allows for the possibility of the presence of the Spirit speaking through any or all of the elements of the quadrilateral and encourages a humble attentiveness to every dimension of life as a potential channel for the Spirit's leading. In other words, a conversational understanding of the quadrilateral invites the cultivation of the spiritual senses in a manner consistent with Wesley. As he wrote in his sermon "The Means of Grace":

Yet as we find no command in Holy Writ for any particular order to be observed herein, so neither do the providence and the Spirit of God adhere to any, without variation: but the means into which different men are led, and in which they find the blessing of God, are varied, transposed, and combined together a thousand different ways. Yet still

our wisdom is to follow the leadings of his providence and his Spirit; to be guided herein (more especially as to the means wherein we ourselves seek the grace of God) partly by his outward providence, giving us the opportunity of using sometimes one means, sometimes another; partly by our experience, which it is whereby his free Spirit is pleased most to work in our heart. And in the meantime the sure and general rule for all who groan for the salvation of God is this—whenever opportunity serves, use all the means which God has ordained. For who knows in which God will meet thee with the grace that bringeth salvation?²

Approaching the elements of the Quadrilateral as partners—albeit not necessarily always as equals—in a conversation also suggests a different understanding of the notion of authority. The dynamics of a conversation in which all parties both listen and speak, all parties possess respect for both self and other, all parties value both their own testimony and the testimony of the others, and all parties yearn above all else to discern and act upon the guidance of the Holy Spirit, strike me as being much more akin to Wesley's appropriation of the elements of the quadrilateral than a static, geometrical understanding.

The conversational understanding of the Quadrilateral advanced in this dissertation views the four testimonies as witnesses to God's authoritative self-disclosure in the world. As such, they testify to God as the source, not only of revelation but also of authority. As testimonies, the authority of the constituents of the Quadrilateral is not intrinsic to them but is derived from their source, to whom they also bear witness. To speak of the authority of scripture, tradition, reason, or experience is to risk investing authority in the witness instead of the

² John Wesley, Sermon 16, "The Means of Grace," § 5.3, in Sermons I, vol. 1 of The Works of John Wesley, ed. Albert C. Outler, Bicentennial ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1984), 395.

source or event from whom or which the witness originates and to whom or which the witness refers. Such an approach suggests a kind of sacramental understanding of Scripture, and by extension tradition, reason, and experience; i.e. an approach which understands the witnesses of the quadrilateral as means of grace.

The Primacy of the Holy Spirit

Arguments about the issue of the primacy of Scripture in relation to the other three elements within the Quadrilateral have tended, in my opinion, to run the risk of bibliolatry, of elevating Scripture from a means of grace to a source of grace. Wesley exhibited a care and clarity which do not always characterize contemporary conversations. In the Preface to his Explanatory Notes upon the Old Testament (1765) Wesley argued that "Scripture can only be understood through the same Spirit whereby it was given." Thus, to use the language of our proposed conversational understanding of the Quadrilateral, the Holy Spirit is the Source and the Scripture is the Holy Spirit's Testament. Stated another way, the Holy Spirit stands in relation to Scripture as an author stands in relation to a literary composition. Hence, in issues pertaining to scriptural authority the "author" in "author-ity" is the Holy Spirit, not Scripture. Scripture is gift, not source; means, not end.

In his sermon "The Means of Grace," Wesley reinforces the distinction I am making between means of grace and source of grace. He writes:

We allow likewise that all outward means whatever, if separate from the

Spirit of God, cannot profit at all, cannot conduce in any degree either to the knowledge or love of God. . . . all outward things, unless he work in them and by them, are mere weak and beggarly elements. Whosoever therefore imagines there is any intrinsic power [emphasis in original] in any means whatsoever does greatly err, not knowing the Scriptures, neither the power of God. We know that there is no inherent power in the words that are spoken in prayer, in the letter of Scripture read, the sound thereof heard, or the bread and wine received in the Lord's Supper; but that it is God alone who is the giver of every good gift, the author [emphasis mine] of all grace; that the whole power is of him, whereby through any of these there is any blessing conveyed to our souls.³

Note that Wesley not only distinguishes between means and Spirit, but he also speaks of God as "author" and, as was suggested in the previous paragraph, the giver or source of any authority attributed to Scripture.

Leroy T. Howe touches upon the difficulty created by referring to any or all of the four testimonies as sources. He argues on behalf of reserving the term "source" to refer "only to revelation itself, namely, God's self-disclosure,"⁴ toward which the other four testimonies of the quadrilateral guide Christians in their reflection.

For surely it is God himself who is the "source" both of faith and understanding; in this light, the guidelines would aid believers' discerning more adequately those events of divine self-presentation from which alone faith and understanding originate. Not even the guideline of Scripture, alleged to be primary, can be the source of faith. It can be a source of judgments made about faith, in the sense of a criterion by which such judgments constantly are scrutinized [emphases in original].⁵

³ Wesley, Sermon 16, "The Means of Grace," § 11.3, in Works, 1:382.

⁴ Leroy T. Howe, "United Methodism in Search of Theology," in Doctrine and Theology in The United Methodist Church, ed. Thomas A. Langford, (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 1991), 55.

⁵ Howe, 55

In his sermon *The Means of Grace*, cited above, Wesley lists three means in particular that he considers to be chief among other means:

Prayer, whether in secret or with the great congregation; searching the Scriptures (which implies reading, hearing, and meditating thereon) and receiving the Lord's Supper, eating bread and drinking wine in remembrance of him; and these we believe to be ordained of God as the ordinary channels of conveying his grace to the souls of men.⁶

(It is, perhaps, worth noting—at least in passing, that it is not Scripture but the searching of Scripture that Wesley cites as a means of grace.) In this sermon Wesley addressed two contrary, but in his mind equally pernicious, misunderstandings of the means of grace. One misunderstanding, the despising of the means of grace, is not of immediate relevance to this discussion. A second misunderstanding, the abusing of the ordinances or means of grace, does speak to our current discussion. The abuse of which Wesley speaks arose when the love of many waxed cold. As a result, “some began to mistake the means for the end [emphases Wesley's] and to place religion rather in doing those outward works than in a heart renewed after the image of God.”⁷

My point in making these observations is not to suggest an absence of love among those who currently engage in debate regarding relative primacy among the elements in the Quadrilateral. Rather, my point is, first of all, to emphasize that for Wesley, Scripture's potential as a means of grace becomes effectual only when it is searched. Arguments about Scripture's primacy are

⁶ Wesley, Sermon 16, “The Means of Grace,” § II.1, in *Works*, 1:381.

⁷ Wesley, Sermon 16, “The Means of Grace,” § I.1-2, in *Works*, 1:378.

functionally irrelevant when separated from experiences of Scripture's incarnation by men and women. Again, to quote Wesley's description of those who mistook means for ends, "They forgot that 'the end of' every 'commandment is love, out of a pure heart, with faith unfeigned:' the loving the Lord their God with all their heart, and their neighbor as themselves."⁸ Secondly, my point is to call attention to the obvious, namely, that Wesley was careful to maintain the distinction between the means of grace and the ends toward which they are intended.

An Incarnational Understanding of the Quadrilateral

An observation made earlier in this dissertation merits recollection at this point.⁹ Albert Outler noted that Wesley's major theological contribution to Anglicanism's triad of Scripture, tradition, and reason was his incorporation into it of the experiential notion of conversion—his own and others.¹⁰ It was this emphasis on "experience," understood as religious experience or experience of the Spirit, to which Wesley refers.

In his sermon "The Almost Christian" Wesley identifies himself as one who during his Oxford days was an almost Christian. After identifying for his hearers those traits that are possessed by almost Christians—including, among

⁸ Wesley, Sermon 16, "The Means of Grace," § 1.2, in Works, 1:381.

⁹ See the discussions in Chapter 4, page I.4.11-13 and Chapter 5, page II.5.5 concerning Wesley's understanding of "experience."

¹⁰ See Chapter 2, above, 8, n. 8.

others, heathen honesty and regard for truth and justice, a form of godliness with all that it entails, and sincerity—Wesley writes,

I did go thus far for many years, as many of this place can testify: using diligence to eschew all evil, and to have a conscience void of offence; redeeming the time, buying up every opportunity of doing all good to all men; constantly and carefully using all the public and all the private means of grace; endeavouring after a steady seriousness of behaviour at all times and in all places. . . . Yet my own conscience beareth me witness I was but 'almost a Christian'¹¹.

He concludes the sermon by identifying that which distinguishes an almost Christian from an altogether Christian.

May we all thus experience what it is to be not almost only, but altogether Christians! Being justified freely by his grace, through the redemption that is in Jesus, knowing we have peace with God through Jesus Christ, rejoicing in hope of the glory of God, and having the love of God shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost given unto us.¹²

This sermon seems to suggest strongly that for Wesley, issues of scriptural primacy notwithstanding, it was an experience of the Spirit that “sealed the deal” in regard to “altogether Christianity.” As was noted earlier, William Abraham made a similar observation when he stated that “it should be recognized that the appeal to experience is logically prior in Wesley to the appeal to Scripture.”¹³

Why this digression into a discussion of Wesley's understanding of experience? It seems to me that contemporary, geometrically-oriented

¹¹ John Wesley, “The Almost Christian”, in John Wesley's Sermons: An Anthology, ed. Albert C. Outler and Richard P. Heitzenrater (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1991), 65.

¹² Wesley, “Almost Christian,” 68.

¹³ Abraham, “Wesleyan Quadrilateral,” 122.

discussions concerning the Quadrilateral have moved in a very un-Wesleyan direction by severing—or at the very least neglecting—the role of the Holy Spirit in relation to the Quadrilateral in particular and Christian experience in general. This omission seems to me to be especially ironic given the fact that for Wesley, the central doctrines of Methodism, which he restated numerous times with slight variations in phrasing, were decidedly incarnational. One of the more recognizable of these statements is found in “The Principles of a Methodist Farther Explained.”

I have again and again, with all the plainness I could, declared what our constant doctrines are; whereby we are distinguished only from Heathens, or nominal Christians; not from any that worship God in spirit and in truth. Our main doctrines, which include all the rest, are three, — that of repentance, of faith, and of holiness [emphases mine]. The first of these we account, as it were, the porch of religion; the next, the door; the third, religion itself.¹⁴

Dis-embodied understandings of the Quadrilateral threaten to lose sight of the fact that the four elements of the Quadrilateral possess neither agency nor efficacy. Sole agency resides with the Holy Spirit, who is sovereign over the elements of the Quadrilateral and for whom the elements of the Quadrilateral are instruments or means. Nor is there any sense in which the elements of the Quadrilateral can be construed as ends or goals in themselves. Rather, they are all potential witnesses whose testimonies to an ongoing conversation between

¹⁴ Wesley, “The Principles of a Methodist Farther Explained” (1746), in The Methodist Societies: History, Nature, and Design, vol. 9 of The Works of John Wesley, ed. Rupert E. Davies, Bicentennial ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989), 227.

God and individuals or communities may elicit faith and human transformation.

Attentiveness to God's claim upon one's life is not to be limited to times spent engaging Scripture—or tradition, experience, or reason, for that matter—as important as any and all of these testimonies may prove to be in the life of an individual or community. The issue is not one of primacy but of wholeness. The Holy Spirit may appropriate any one of the four testimonies to be chronologically prior or primary in eliciting faith in a given situation. However, regardless of which of the four testimonies is chronologically prior or primary for a Christian individual or community, the continued absence of the remaining three testimonies jeopardizes one's ability to grow in repentance, faith, and holiness. A faith that is growing toward wholeness or perfection requires that all four testimonies of the Quadrilateral engage in dynamic, faith-filled conversations with each other. This dissertation contends that such a dynamic, conversational understanding of the Quadrilateral lends itself to a more authentically Wesleyan approach to adult faith-formation than does a rigidly segmented approach. The end or goal toward which the Holy Spirit utilizes the elements of the Quadrilateral is the efficacious transformation of communities and individuals into the likeness of Christ—again, to reiterate the language of John Wesley, repentance, faith, and holiness.

Earlier in this dissertation I spoke briefly of the differences between Wesley's use of the word "experience" on one hand and our twenty-first century use of the word on the other. Contemporary understandings of the word

“experience” tend to include an almost limitless range of physical or psychic encounters, while Wesley’s understanding of “experience” referred to an experience of the Holy Spirit. Since our discussion of an incarnational understanding of the Quadrilateral implies the experiencing or en-fleshing the Holy Spirit, one last distinction is necessary, a distinction made by Randy Maddox when he characterized Wesley’s appeals to experience as being typically characterized by “an external, long-term, communal reality.”¹⁵ The incarnational understanding of the Quadrilateral as espoused in this dissertation is primarily communal, not individual. This dissertation’s conversational understanding of the Quadrilateral may be understood as inherently communal. The multiplicity of voices or testimonies constitutes a community of witnesses, past and present. As Maddox writes in another article,

Wesley’s use of the various resources for doctrinal reflection was ultimately dialogical [emphasis in original]. It was not a matter of using whichever resources seemed more helpful, or of playing one resource off against another, but of conferring among them until some consensus was found. His expectation of such consensus was based on the assumption that it is the same self-revealing God being encountered through Scripture, tradition, and experience—when each of these is rightly and rationally utilized.¹⁶

The Wesleyan Quadrilateral and Christian Education

The controversies surrounding differing approaches to the Quadrilateral also have implications for adult education and faith formation in the United

¹⁵ Maddox, Responsible Grace, 46.

¹⁶ Randy Maddox, “The Enriching Role,” 122.

Methodist tradition. Negatively, the fragmented, geometrical understanding of the Quadrilateral suggests an approach to adult education that separates and isolates Scripture from tradition, reason from experience, etc. The Christian's life in relation to these four elements is then treated as four distinct compartments, when, in reality, the components of a Christian's life—however characterized—are constantly and dynamically interrelating and interpenetrating. All four elements of the Quadrilateral are inseparably present in ever-varying degrees.

The direction of discussions regarding primacy, specifically the primacy of Scripture, may also have the unintended consequence of distorting a holistic understanding of the Christian's formation in faith and life. More will be said about this potential distortion below. Suffice it at the moment to say that undue emphasis on scriptural primacy threatens to be misconstrued as sola scriptura, a position that the English Reformers resisted in favor of a more nuanced approach to Scripture.¹⁷ Additionally, it might legitimately be argued that Wesley placed experience over Scripture. How so? Not in the sense of experience as a self-validating authority over Scripture, but rather in the sense that an understanding of Scripture that remains disembodied is incomplete. Until the teachings of Scripture are lived and experienced in the lives of Christians, Scripture's work remains incomplete. Surely it is not insignificant that for Wesley,

¹⁷See W. Stephen Gunter, "The Quadrilateral and the 'Middle Way'," in Wesley and the Quadrilateral: Renewing the Conversation, W. Stephen Gunter, et al. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1997), 17-38, for a helpful survey of the English Reformers' approach to Scripture.

the main doctrines that he espouses over and over again are not a doctrine of Scripture or God or Trinity or Church. The main doctrines he espouses over and over again are repentance, faith, and holiness—experiences of Scripture's message. And again, surely it is not insignificant that for Wesley, that which was lacking in the Anglican triad was experience.¹⁸

Positively, a holistic, conversational understanding of the Quadrilateral suggests an approach to Christian adult education and faith formation that acknowledges and affirms the dynamic interactivity that characterizes not only the Quadrilateral but also the Christian life. Inherent in this understanding of the Quadrilateral is a pedagogy for faith formation in general and Christian education in particular that takes seriously not only all four testimonies of the Quadrilateral, but also the freedom of the Holy Spirit to act transformationally through myriad combinations of any one or all of them toward repentance, faith, and holiness.

The Four Testimonies Reconsidered

The relocation of Quadrilateral's four testimonies—Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience, is not intended to address, let alone resolve, issues regarding their relative primacy or equality. Nor is their relocation intended to simplify or clarify the discussions. If anything, their relocation is likely to increase complexity, confusion, and ambiguity by emphasizing their inseparability. Scripture, regardless of one's theological convictions regarding issues relating to

¹⁸Outler, "Wesleyan Quadrilateral," 79-80.

primacy and inspiration, is a repository of tradition(s), reason, and experience. Christian tradition, whether limited to the writings of the ante-Nicene Greek fathers (a la Wesley) or extended to include today's global plethora of special interest theologies, is regarded as Christian by virtue of its engagement with the reasonings and experiences of people in relation to Scripture. Reason, regardless of its relative naivete or sophistication, takes as its subject matter the claims of Scripture and the claims and experiences of those who profess or deny the claims of Scripture. Experience, understood in Wesley's sense as the Christian's experience of God's love or grace, is mediated through the Christian's engagement with Scripture, tradition, and reason.

Scripture

For the purpose of this dissertation, including the representative studies with which it will conclude, Christian Scripture is understood to possess a primacy that is qualified in the senses discussed above; i.e., it is first among penultimates, it is a means not an end, and apart from the Holy Spirit it possesses neither agency nor efficacy. Scripture is understood to be primary in another sense: While interpretations and applications of Scripture that have arisen and will continue to arise from tradition, reason, and experience must always be subject to reexamination and reformulation in light of new insights and challenges; and while former interpretations and applications of Scripture may be swept away in light of new insights and challenges; Scripture itself may not be swept away.

Scripture alone (as qualified above), and none of its interpretations, is and must remain the touchstone of Christian thinking and living. This view is consonant with that expressed by John Cobb:

[T]he effort to determine whether a belief is Christian always end[s] up by our questioning its relation to Scripture. That is what the primacy of Scripture really means. Directly or indirectly, each Christian affirmation must be justified by the character of the originating events of our faith. Often this relation is established through an indirect and critical approach. But if we are thinking as Christians, we cannot avoid this final test of what we affirm.¹⁹

To remove or replace Christian Scripture as the touchstone of Christian thinking and living is tantamount to severing our connection with the Christ event and ceasing to be Christian in any meaningful sense of the term.

Traditions

We have already examined Wesley's understanding of tradition and found it to be much narrower than is often realized.²⁰ This dissertation will knowingly deviate from Wesley's understanding in favor of a broader and more contemporary understanding.

Jesus' illustration of new/old wine and wineskins likewise touches on the need for wisdom in discerning the relative appropriateness between continuity and change. Christian historian Jerislav Pelikan coined the phrase "Tradition is

¹⁹ John Cobb, Becoming a Thinking Christian (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), 62.

²⁰ See the discussion above, 52-57.

the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living,"²¹ In her book Education for Continuity and Change Mary Elizabeth Moore critiques the dualistic approach that often characterizes discussions surrounding the relationship between continuity and change. Rather than viewing the relationship between the two as dichotomous, she proposes their relationship be understood as dialogical. Moreover, she insists that continuity and change are incomplete without the future-oriented dimension of hope.²² To aid in her argument, Moore distinguishes among Tradition (with a capital-T), understood as what God gives or hands over; tradition (lower case-t), which refers to the process by which God's gift is passed on; and traditions (plural), the vehicles of communication. She cautions against mistaking one for another: "Traditions often become equated with Tradition, and God's actions get reduced to human proportions."²³ Moore coins the word "traditioning" to distinguish between tradition as a process and traditions. "Traditioning," says Moore, "is the process of handing over God's gifts (Tradition) from one person to another, and traditions are the vehicles by which this is done."²⁴ This paper's understanding of tradition more nearly

²¹ Jaroslav Pelikan, The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600), vol. 1 of The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 9.

²² Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore, Education for Continuity and Change (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1983), 14-16.

²³ Moore, 23.

²⁴ Moore, 24.

resembles that of Pelikan (tradition versus traditionalism) and Moore (a dynamic understanding of Tradition, tradition, and traditions) than it does Wesley's more static understanding of tradition as the teaching and practice of the early church.

Functionally, this broader understanding of tradition is intended to serve in a manner akin to that espoused by C.S. Lewis in his "Introduction" to On the Incarnation by St. Athanasius.²⁵ There Lewis espouses the reading of old books as a way to avoid becoming the unwitting victim of cultural blindness. He writes that

People [in the past] were no cleverer then than they are now; they made as many mistakes as we. But not the same [emphasis in original] mistakes. They will not flatter us in the errors we are already committing. . . two heads are better than one, not because either is infallible but because they are unlikely to go wrong in the same direction.²⁶

Unlike Lewis, however, we will consider the value not only of chronological distance but also of cultural distance. For example, contemporary liberationist theologies may serve to reveal areas in which contemporary theologies of a majority culture are blind.

Reason

As was seen above, Wesley was, on one hand, pessimistic about the limits of reason alone, due to his understanding of reason as a tool rather than a source of knowledge. His pessimistic attitude toward reason extended to

²⁵ C.S. Lewis, "Introduction," in On the Incarnation, by Athanasius (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1998), 3-10.

²⁶ Lewis, "Introduction," 5.

religious knowledge in general and Christian knowledge in particular. However, as Rebekah Miles has noted, for Wesley,

When reason is accompanied by the data of the ordinary senses, the spiritual senses, and particular the revelation of Scripture, it helps not only in the tasks of daily life, but also in religion, and even in matters of Christian faith. Reason alone can accomplish very little; reason in good company can do many things.²⁷

Wesley's mediating understanding of reason as a means for bringing religion and into conversation with non-religious pursuits, including the scientific discoveries of his own day, provides us with strong historical precedent for continuing conversations with the scientific discoveries of our own day.

While we post-moderns may hasten to point out the ways in which Wesley's understanding of reason was culturally bound, we, like Wesley, find ourselves facing those who, to use Wesley's words, "despise and vilify reason," on one hand, and others who "extol it to the skies," on the other, albeit for very different reasons than Wesley's contemporaries.²⁸

Even as she acknowledges "huge differences in the assumptions about reason in Wesley's time and ours," Miles finds factors in Wesley's understanding

²⁷ Rebekah L. Miles, "The Instrumental Role of Reason," in Wesley and the Quadrilateral: Renewing the Conversation, W. Stephen Gunter, et. al. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1997), 94.

²⁸ Miles, 100. See also Wesley's Sermon 70, "The Case of Reason Impartially Considered," §§ 2-5, in Sermons 2, vol. 2 of The Works of John Wesley, ed. Albert Outler, Bicentennial ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1976-), 588-89.

that both “challenge contemporary discussions and are challenged by contemporary discussion [emphases in original].”²⁹ As in much postmodern thinking, Wesley would probably not advocate on behalf of abstract absolute truth claims. He would also be inclined to appeal to particular experience, again not unlike postmoderns, though postmoderns would likely not share his level of confidence in the objectivity of such appeals. Wesley’s emphasis on reason in relation to embodied experience is, likewise, consistent with much contemporary theology, as is his acknowledgment of a close connection between reason and the affections.

One further observation by Miles is especially compatible with the Quadrilateral’s relocation as proposed in this dissertation. For Wesley,

reason’s work is not a self-enclosed, individual task. Reason’s extent depends on the abundant resources of the environment, including discourse with other people and traditions. Reason always works in conversation. Thus, Christian “conference” is necessary to theological reasoning.³⁰

The limits of our human reason, according to Wesley, serve to drive us to God, and our trust in God is not an ending but a beginning. When, out of our recognition and acknowledgment of our limits, we turn to God in faith, God’s gracious response is to quicken our spiritual senses. The result is access to spiritual experience from which we were formerly shut off and an increase in knowledge. Says Miles, “The limits [of reason] are themselves therapeutic; they

²⁹ Miles, 102.

³⁰ Miles, 103.

are a means of divine grace, driving us toward God and ultimately toward greater spiritual knowledge."³¹

Experience

Perhaps nothing better captures Wesley's insistence that Scripture without experience (understood as implementation) is unsatisfactory than his own rules for reading Scripture. In the Preface to his Explanatory Notes upon the Old Testament he listed six practical guidelines for reading Scripture, including when to read, what to read, and how to read. He wrote, in conclusion that "whatever light you then receive should be used to the uttermost, and that immediately. Let there be no delay. Whatever you resolve, begin to execute the first moment you can. So shall you find this word to be indeed the power of God unto present and eternal salvation."³²

The testimony of experience in our relocated Quadrilateral will be understood in a way more nearly akin to Wesley, as discussed above, than to some contemporary understandings. Contemporary understandings tend to extend significant authority to the internal, emotional, psychic, or spiritual experience of the individual, due in part, perhaps, to the (undue?) emphasis we

³¹ Miles, 105-106.

³² John Wesley, "Explanatory Notes upon the Old Testament: Preface," in The Works of John Wesley, ed. Thomas Jackson, 14 vols., CD-ROM ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2005), 14:253; hereafter cited as Works (Jackson).

latter-day Methodists have placed on Wesley's heart warming experience.³³

Wesley himself warned against this type of self-authorizing subjectivity in relation to forms of Christian mysticism to which he was opposed in his own day. He wrote Mrs. Ryan, "You appear to undervalue the experience of almost every one in comparison of your own."³⁴ Some seven years later he wrote to Mary Bishop, "if you study the mystic writers, you will find as many religions as books; and for this plain reason, each of them makes his own experience the standard of religion."³⁵

Borrowing from Randy Maddox's summary of the role of experience for Wesley,³⁶ we will emphasize experience as it relates, first, to providing empowerment for Christ-like living. An authentic inner experience of God's love will manifest itself in our authentic love toward God and others. A second role of experience is to provide guidance for our spiritual pilgrimage. Experience in this

³³ Randy L. Maddox, in his article "The Enriching Role of Experience," in Wesley and the Quadrilateral: Renewing the Conversation, W. Stephen Gunter, et. al. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1997), 107-127, especially 112-115, provides a helpful, concise discussion not only of Wesley's understanding of experience in general and his Aldersgate experience in particular, but also of the current tendency of popular culture to reduce experience to mere personal perspective.

³⁴ John Wesley, "Letters from the Reverend John Wesley to Various Persons, CCXXIII," Letter to Mrs. Ryan (28 June 1766), in Works (Jackson), vol. 12.

³⁵ Wesley, "Letters from the Reverend John Wesley, to Various Persons, DCCVI," Letter to Mary Bishop (19 September 1773), in Works (Jackson), vol. 13.

³⁶ See note 16 above.

case speaks not so much of our own experience as of our willingness to test our own experiences with the experiences of others, again, a reference to Christian conferencing. A third role of experience refers to its ability to provide public evidence to ourselves and others of Christian teachings. Publically observable experience can not only demonstrate the authenticity of our faith claims to others, it can also assure us of the authenticity of our own faith.

Maddox suggests, fourth, that experience can provide guidance in doctrinal decisions. He confirms that

from the earliest days of the church theological claims have typically emerged out of a variety of grass-roots settings and situations, and the doctrinal task has been to discern which of these claims warranted strong refutation, which could be considered fanciful but harmless, and which should be endorsed or nurtured for broader acceptance.³⁷

He concludes that, for Wesley, experience—along with Scripture, tradition, and reason, is a contributor to a dialogical process among the four. The expectation was the arrival at consensus, an expectation made possible by Wesley's "assumption that it is the same self-revealing God being encountered through Scripture, tradition, and experience—when each of these is rightly and rationally utilized."³⁸ Finally, Maddox suggests that the daily corporate life experienced by the Christian community is for Wesley both the goad and goal of theological reflection.³⁹

³⁷ Maddox, "Enriching Role of Experience," 121.

³⁸ Maddox, "Enriching Role of Experience," 122.

³⁹ Maddox, "Enriching Role of Experience," 125-26.

Since, according to Albert Outler, it was experience that Wesley found lacking from the Anglican triad of Scripture, tradition, and reason,⁴⁰ a contemporary Wesleyan understanding of experience will play a critical role in our relocation of the Quadrilateral into the realm of Christian education and faith formation as well. Among the better-articulated and more easily accessible contemporary expressions of Wesley's understanding of experience is David Lowes Watson's Covenant Discipleship.⁴¹ Watson commends those who participate in the mutual accountability of covenant discipleship groups for "recovering a Wesleyan tradition we have come dangerously close to losing in our present climate of churchly success and religious self-fulfillment."⁴²

Watson's attempt to recover an authentically Wesleyan understanding of experience by means of accountable discipleship is rooted in Wesley's General Rules. The only precondition for entrance into Wesley's societies—and Watson's latter-day covenant discipleship groups, was Wesley's General Rules, abridged by Watson as "a desire to be saved from sin, whether or not one could claim to

⁴⁰ Outler, "The Wesleyan Quadrilateral," 79.

⁴¹ David Lowes Watson, Covenant Discipleship: Christian Formation through Mutual Accountability (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 1991). Also helpful are Watson's Accountable Discipleship: Handbook for Covenant Discipleship Groups in the Congregation, rev. ed. (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 1985); Steven W. Manskar's Accountable Discipleship: Living in God's Household (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 2000); and Gayle Turner Watson's Guide for Covenant Discipleship Groups (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 2000).

⁴² David Watson, Covenant Discipleship, ix.

have had a particular faith experience. To continue in a Methodist society, however, one had to give evidence of this desire: by avoiding evil, by doing good, and by using the means of grace, instituted by the church and proven in practice [emphases in original].⁴³

Watson modifies Wesley's rules for contemporary use by creating what might be called an experiential quadrilateral (not to be confused with the Wesleyan Quadrilateral) consisting of a vertical and a horizontal axis that intersect at a ninety-degree angle, creating four equal, square quadrants. The two quadrants above the horizontal axis comprise acts of Christian love that are directed toward other people—acts of mercy. The two quadrants below the horizontal axis comprise acts of Christian love that are directed toward God—acts of piety. The two quadrants to the right of the vertical axis comprise acts of love that represent primarily communal or group expressions. The two quadrants to the left of the vertical axis comprise acts of love that represent primarily individual or one-to-one expressions. In other words, our acts of piety—those acts of love that are directed toward God (below the horizontal axis), may be expressed in a group or in one-to-one encounters. Group experiences or acts of

⁴³ David Watson, Covenant Discipleship, 40. The General Rules first appeared in John Wesley's "Nature, Design, and General Rules of the United Societies" (1743), §§ 1-7, in The Methodist Societies: History, Nature, and Design, vol. 9 of The Works of John Wesley, ed. Rupert E. Davies, Bicentennial ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989), 69-73. The continuing relevance of Wesley's General Rules to United Methodism is evidenced by their inclusion in the most recent edition of The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, 2004 (Nashville, TN: United Methodist Publishing House, 2004), 48.

love toward God are called worship; one-to-one experiences or acts of love toward God are called devotion. Likewise, our acts of mercy—those acts of love that are directed toward other people (above the horizontal axis), may be expressed in either group or one-to-one experiences or acts of love. Group experiences or acts of love toward other people are called justice; one-to-one experiences or acts of love toward another person are called compassion.⁴⁴

Watson's intent is to restore balance to Christian discipleship by returning to an authentically Wesleyan understanding of accountable Christian discipleship. His reconstruction is intended to avoid the dichotomies of public-private and social-spiritual. This dissertation's relocation of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral into Christian education and faith formation will incorporate Watson's four-dimensional approach to covenant discipleship into the witness of Christian experience and will speak of the need to balance Watson's four dimensions of Christian experience.

Pedagogical Implications of a Relocated Quadrilateral

The implications of this dissertation's twofold relocation of the Quadrilateral—(1) from Wesleyan history and theology to Christian education and (2) from the realm of geometry to the realm of communication, are not limited to the new ways in which we may understand and use it for our theological reflection. Much as a social understanding of the Trinity generates an understanding the Christian life that is fundamentally communitarian, relational,

⁴⁴ David Watson, Covenant Discipleship, 116.

and communicative, so the relocation of the Quadrilateral into the realm of communication enables it to suggest to us new ways of engaging both the Quadrilateral and one another in the ongoing task of Christian education and faith formation. The remainder of this chapter will explore some of dynamics of faith formation implicit in a relocated Quadrilateral.

The Quadrilateral as a Paradigm for Holistic Christian Living

William Abraham was quoted above as saying that

the basic attraction of the quadrilateral is surely that it captures in a convenient principle the need for the theologian to consult all relevant data and warrants before arriving at any particular theological proposal. Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience, these four cover the various fields to be consulted. It is difficult to see how any relevant considerations would be omitted if these were properly explored.⁴⁵

The comprehensive scope encompassed by the Quadrilateral suggests one way of viewing both the task and the goal of Christian education and faith formation. Rather than a content-oriented emphasis on the primacy of any one testimony over the others or the isolation of the testimonies from one another, the task and goal of Christian education and faith formation is the holistic introduction and integration of all four of the Quadrilateral's testimonies. The 2004 Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church affirms (in continuity with every Book of Discipline since 1972) that

Wesley believed that the living core of the Christian faith was revealed in Scripture, illumined by tradition, vivified in personal experience, and

⁴⁵ Abraham, "The Wesleyan Quadrilateral," 123. See above, 39

confirmed by reason.⁴⁶

The implication for Christian education is that a faithful embodiment of this “living core of Christian faith” requires a balanced, ongoing conversation with and integration of all four testimonies.

Temporary Suspension of Primacy

While reaffirming the primacy of Scripture, albeit in a qualified sense, the relocated Quadrilateral insists on conversational courtesy; scriptural primacy does not exempt Scripture from deeply listening and attending to the uninterrupted testimony of the other three witnesses. Further, scriptural primacy does not exempt Scripture from cross-examination by other witnesses. And finally, scriptural primacy does not exempt Scripture from the obligation to resist premature conclusions until all witnesses have heard and cross-examined. In other words, scriptural primacy may not be used as an excuse for subverting or short-circuiting the process of faith-formation.

In the ongoing debate surrounding the primacy of Scripture John Cobb has warned consistently against “sharply separating Scripture from the other three, emphasizing its sole primacy [italics mine] and subordinating the others to

⁴⁶ The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, 2004 (Nashville, TN: United Methodist Publishing House, 2004), 77. The written and oral examinations required for ordination in The United Methodist Church state this position and ask the candidates to respond to the question, “What is your understanding of this theological position of the Church?” (Discipline, 2004, 216.)

it.”⁴⁷ His concern regarding the issue of the primacy of Scripture within the Quadrilateral generates at least three interrelated questions that bear upon our understanding of the relocated Quadrilateral. The first question is that of chronological priority: Does the primacy of Scripture imply that authentic theology must begin with Scripture? That is to ask if one must put aside all other concerns and engage only the Scripture in study and prayer if one is to engage in the work of theology. The second is a question of origins: Does the primacy of Scripture imply that it alone among the four elements of the Quadrilateral is the source from which authentic theology can originate? That is to ask if the other three members of the Quadrilateral serve only as handmaidens whose roles consist solely of serving and supporting theology which can only emerge from Scripture. The second question differs from the first in that it allows for the possibility that issues relevant to theology may be encountered among any of the other three, but only by the touchstone of Scripture may issues take on the weight of “theology.” The final question is one of authority: Does the primacy of Scripture imply that it and it alone among the members of the Quadrilateral need not submit to interrogation by the other three and that the other three must pass muster with Scripture?

These questions bear upon this dissertation’s understanding of the Quadrilateral, first of all, because its contention is that at least part of what is

⁴⁷ John B. Cobb, “I Say, ‘Keep the Quadrilateral!’” Circuit Rider (May 1987): 4.

meant by God's prevenience has to do God's willingness to be present to us wherever we find ourselves. That being the case, authentic theology need not begin with Scripture but with God, regardless of where God may be encountered. Secondly, the relocated Quadrilateral implies that life circumstances are capable not only of surfacing issues worthy of theological reflection in light of Scripture; life circumstances are also capable of surfacing issues that are themselves inherently theological, independent of Scripture. Finally, the relocated Quadrilateral implies that Scripture must be an equal participant in the mutual interrogation which takes place among the members of the Quadrilateral. As was discussed above, the question is not so much a matter of primacy of Scripture per se as it is a matter of the nature of that primacy. Is Scripture's primacy a matter of ancient formulations cast in concrete and immune from the ravages of time? Is Scripture's primacy a trump card that is played at the beginning of a hand so that the game is immediately ended and all further discussion and reflection are not only stifled but moot? Is Scripture's primacy, in the original sense of the word canon, acknowledged after all four constituents of the Quadrilateral have been allowed both voice and vote; i.e., in the end is Scripture the "measure" that insures that all angles of any proposed theological structure are plumb in their relation to one another?

In Cobb's book Becoming a Thinking Christian, a section entitled "Testing Beliefs" ends with these words, "Finally, some biblical justification is always

needed.”⁴⁸ Later in the same book Cobb reinforces his point:

Authentic theological work always deals with Scripture, with tradition, with experience, and with reason . . . The four authorities are usually listed as above, giving pride of place, quite appropriately, to Scripture. For certain purposes this is fine. But if the purpose is to give realistic guidance to theological thinking, then it makes little sense to place one authority above the others as if it might overrule them. Each is, in its own way, decisive. . . . [T]he effort to determine whether a belief is Christian always end[s] up by our questioning its relation to Scripture. That is what the primacy of Scripture really means. Directly or indirectly, each Christian affirmation must be justified by the character of the originating events of our faith. Often this relation is established through an indirect and critical approach. But if we are thinking as Christians, we cannot avoid this final test of what we affirm.⁴⁹

The understanding of primacy as espoused in this paper is more about extending to Scripture the last word, though not necessarily the first word and certainly not the only word. Any of the four elements within the Quadrilateral may serve as a point of entry into Christian education and faith formation. The interrelationship among the four elements is radically egalitarian, meaning that all, including Scripture, may find themselves not only interpreted, but also corrected by the others. In the actual events of our lives the interplay among the four is more likely to resemble the spontaneity of a jazz improvisation than the pre-scripted entries of a Bartok string quartet.

The Context of the Faith Community

Much of our discussion of experience (see above, 110-116) addressed

⁴⁸ John B. Cobb, Becoming a Thinking Christian (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), 56.

⁴⁹ Cobb, Becoming a Thinking Christian, 61f.

the importance of community to our relocated Quadrilateral. Suffice it to say at this point that the very notion of a conversational Quadrilateral requires the participation of multiple voices. Moreover, few emphases could be more authentically Wesleyan than an emphasis upon the centrality of Christian community. Wesley himself, in his Preface to the 1739 Collection of Hymns and Sacred Poems, criticized the individualistic emphasis of the mystics whom he once admired. He writes:

Solitary religion is not to be found there [among the mystics]. "Holy solitaires" is a phrase no more consistent with the gospel than holy adulterers. The gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social; no holiness but social holiness [emphasis mine]. "Faith working by love" is the length and breadth and depth and height of Christian perfection. "This commandment have we from Christ, that he who loves God, love his brother also;" and that we manifest our love "by doing good unto all men; especially to them that are of the household of faith."⁵⁰

The importance of Christian community was foundational and formative to Wesley's personal spiritual life and thought, as indicated by his involvement in the Holy Club in Oxford as early as 1729. So great was the impact of the accountability of a small group upon his life that in 1742 he incorporated the small group dynamic into his evangelistic work in the form of weekly class meetings. Even more, for Wesley Christian conference was a means of grace. One contemporary United Methodist author suggests the phrase "Christian fellowship and conversation" as a modern rendering of Wesley's intent.⁵¹

⁵⁰ John Wesley, "Hymns and Sacred Poems," in Works (Jackson), vol. 14.

⁵¹ Charles Yrigoyen, Jr., John Wesley: Holiness of Heart and Life (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 50.

Acknowledging the Christian community as the context within which our relocated Quadrilateral is situated raises many issues, only some of which will be addressed briefly. While the phrase Christian community most immediately calls to mind the physical presence of a group of people in a shared space, the present witness of past voices is part and parcel of our dynamic understanding of the witness of tradition. Not only that, but the spiritual presence of those who are living but physically distant must also be taken seriously. Christians in other places and cultures, from an enormous variety of ethnic and socio-economic locations, experiencing plenty or want, persecution and terror, with whom we agree and disagree—all must be acknowledged as participants in the larger faith community context.

Contextualizing faith formation within the Christian community also requires acknowledging human limitations and imperfections. Wesley demonstrated a wonderfully nuanced understanding of human limitations in (strange as it may seem) his Sermon 40, “Christian Perfection” (1741), in which he articulates those senses in which Christians are not perfect. They are not perfect in knowledge and will never in this life, be free from ignorance, especially in regard to the things of God—past, present, or future.⁵² Nor will Christians be free from mistakes in this life, “seeing those who ‘know but in part’ are ever liable to err touching the things which they know not.” Though it is true that “the

⁵² John Wesley, “Christian Perfection,” §§ I.1-3, in Sermons II, vol. 2 of The Works of John Wesley, ed. Albert C. Outler, Bicentennial ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1985), 100-01.

children of God do not mistake as to the things essential to salvation,” still, “in things unessential to salvation they do err, and that frequently.”

Especially pertinent to this discussion is Wesley’s caution regarding our ability to err in regard to the meaning of the words of Scripture and thereby unknowingly to hold erroneous interpretations.

With regard to the Holy Scriptures themselves, as careful as they are to avoid it, the best of men are liable to mistake, and do mistake day by day; especially with respect to those parts thereof which less immediately relate to practice. Hence even the children of God are not agreed as to the interpretation of many places in Holy Writ; nor is their difference of opinion any proof that they are not the children of God on either side. But it is a proof that we are no more to expect any living man to be infallible than to be omniscient [emphases Wesley’s].⁵³

Wesley identifies a third area of human imperfections as infirmities, in the sense of both outward and inward weaknesses—i.e., “weakness or slowness of understanding, dullness or confusedness of apprehension, incoherency of thought, irregular quickness or heaviness of imagination. . . . the want of a ready or of a retentive memory . . . slowness of speech, impropriety of language, ungracefulness of pronunciation,” etc. Finally, Wesley acknowledges that Christians, like the Master they serve, will never achieve perfection so as to be wholly free from temptation in this life.

Practically speaking, the communal context within which Christian faith formation takes place presupposes at the very least those imperfections listed by Wesley. As a consequence, Christian faith formation within a communal context

⁵³ Wesley, “Christian Perfection,” §§ 1.1-4, 2:101-02.

implies the possibility (perhaps even a probability) of error and conflicting opinions. Differing opinions may arise from either ignorance or incomplete knowledge, including ignorance or partial knowledge of our own ignorance or partial knowledge. Therefore, prayerful humility is the appropriate spiritual posture for those who participate in the communal faith formation process, as well as an openness to new insights and a willingness to change. Lack of consensus may be the norm rather than the exception. Human limitations preclude complete, untainted knowledge and thus demand a willingness to reexamine any decision (whether achieved by consensus or majority) in light of either new knowledge or newly-acquired awareness of tainted-ness in accepted knowledge. Finally, over and above all is the mystery of God's grace toward us and others, including our enemies. Again, to quote Wesley,

there [is no] absolute perfection on earth. There is no 'perfection of degrees', as it is termed; none which does not admit of a continual increase. So that how much soever any man hath attained, or in how high a degree soever he is perfect, he hath still need to 'grow in grace', and daily to advance in the knowledge and love of God his Saviour.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Wesley, "Christian Perfection," § 1.8, 2:104-05.

CHAPTER 7

A Wesleyan Pedagogy

Thus far we have argued for a twofold relocation of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral from the realms of Wesleyan history and theology into the realms of Christian education and faith formation, and from the realm of geometry into the realm of conversation. From these relocations we have suggested a parallel between Wesley's notion of Christian conferencing as a means of grace and an educational pedagogy that brings experience, Scripture, traditions, and reason into conversation not only with each other, but also with the Holy Spirit. The remainder of this chapter will identify the characteristics, describe the process, and illustrate the practice of a uniquely Wesleyan pedagogy.

Characteristics of a Wesleyan Pedagogy

In this section we distill out of our conversational understanding of the Quadrilateral six characteristics that are foundational to a pedagogy that is uniquely Wesleyan. Under the primacy of the Spirit, our pedagogy is prayerful, practical, conversational, transformational, and accountable to a community.

Primacy of the Spirit

We have seen above that the issue of scriptural primacy has been central to much of the current debate surrounding the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. I have suggested that an emphasis on scriptural primacy has tended to exclude the role of the Holy Spirit from the conversation. All four voices represented within the

Quadrilateral are penultimate to the role of the Holy Spirit. Stated another way, the Holy Spirit is sovereign over experience, Scripture, traditions, and reason. Any understanding of the nature of the interrelationships among the voices within the Quadrilateral must begin with their penultimacy clearly in mind.

Another sense in which the Spirit is primary for Wesley has to do with his understanding of the Spirit's role in the correct interpretation of Scripture. As was noted above, Wesley considered the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to be the one attribute necessary for the correct interpretation of Scripture.¹ In the Preface to his Explanatory Notes upon the Old Testament (1765) Wesley argued that "Scripture can only be understood through the same Spirit whereby it was given."²

A final sense in which the primacy of the Spirit manifests itself has to do with the environment within which the pedagogy takes place. Recognition of the Spirit's presence within the contemporary and ancient writers, as well as within contemporary conversation partners, evokes an attitude of mutual reverence and respect, a reverence and respect whose absence signifies a denial of Spirit and a need to return to a sensitivity of the Spirit's presence.

Prayerful

In this pedagogy, prayer is understood to be both the conscious acknowledgment of the Holy Spirit's presence that permeates the situation in

¹ See above, 56.

² Jones, Scripture, 105.

which an individual may find her- or himself and the desire to be attuned to that presence. Prayer is also understood to represent the individual's or group's choice to attend to the Holy Spirit's presence and respond to the Holy Spirit's guidance as revealed within the conversation that takes place among experience, Scripture, traditions, and reason. Prayer manifests itself first and foremost as a way of listening for and hearing the Spirit's answer to the question, What is God telling us in this situation? Only after listening does prayer become a way of speaking.

Practical

What is there about John Wesley's way of doing theology that suggests a uniquely Wesleyan approach to Christian faith formation? Randy Maddox is not alone among theologians—both Wesleyan and non-Wesleyan—to point out the fact that John Wesley was not a systematic theologian. Maddox wrote, "When one reads secondary treatments of Wesley one repeatedly comes across disclaimers of his being a 'systematic' theologian. If an alternative characterization is listed, among the more common is 'practical' theologian."³ Maddox de-constructs what he considers to be caricatures of what practical theology entails, surveys historical understandings of practical theology, and addresses what he considers to be its most significant critique, namely, that its occasional nature jeopardizes the internal consistency which is a hallmark of

³ Randy Maddox, "John Wesley: Practical Theologian?" Wesleyan Theological Journal 23 (1988): 122-47.

systematic theology. Maddox concludes that for Wesley, theological consistency it is not

unchanging doctrinal summaries, nor a theoretical idea from which all truth is deduced, nor given order in a "system." Rather, it is a basic orienting perspective or concern that guides their various theological activities. Particular responses could vary as appropriate to their situation and yet retain consistency because each situation is addressed from the standpoint of the same orienting perspective.⁴

This observation of Maddox helps to explain why contextual variations in one's present experience may result in a response that appears to contradict both Scripture and tradition, even as it is faithful to their shared orienting perspective.

Our Wesleyan pedagogy begins with a specific understanding of the word "practical." "Practical" is not used in the sense of being a preferable option among many or a path of least resistance; for example, "It is probably more practical to avoid the freeway at this hour." Nor is "practical" intended to imply that other approaches to theology are "impractical." Rather, "practical" in our Wesleyan perspective is understood in the sense of "practice-able," as embodied beliefs, as claims about God that are concretized by chosen behaviors. Our Wesleyan pedagogy emerges out of a specific individual or communal concern that has its roots in observable, embodied practices that occur in an identifiable time and place. Practical theology insists that faithful Christian living is more than assent to creedal formulations and affirmations of faith. From the perspective of practical theology, the bottom line is the

⁴ Maddox, "John Wesley, Practical theologian?" 12

embodiment of the implications of Christian creeds and affirmations in a manner relevant to the world in which we live.

Conversational

In this proposed Wesleyan pedagogy, the importance of reasserting the primacy of the Holy Spirit is accompanied by the importance of relocating the Wesleyan Quadrilateral from the realm of geometry to the realm of conversation. The conversation partners, identified variously in this dissertation as witnesses, testimonies, or voices with whom the Christian individual or group engages (under the prayerful guidance of the Holy Spirit) are experience, Scripture, traditions, and reason. In keeping with the conversational metaphor, no one participant in the conversation has the privilege of being the sole designated initiator; any of the four witnesses may initiate the conversation. The order in which voices of the Quadrilateral are discussed below is not intended to imply either a primacy or a necessary pedagogical chronology. It is anticipated, however, that for many people, questions about how they should embody their Christian faith in their daily lives will emerge out of experience. However, the pedagogy begins where it begins, though it must eventually include all four testimonies. A discussion of the roles of each of the four testimonies (experience, Scripture, traditions, and reason) follows.

In the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, the voice of experience refers not simply to any of the whole range of potential human experiences. For Wesley, the voice of experience refers specifically to an experience of God. Wesley's emphasis on

the importance of an experience of God intersects with his emphasis on the importance of practice. Experience is important for our Wesleyan pedagogy for many of the same reasons it was important for Wesley. First, we experience God through our participation in the means of grace. Wesley defined means of grace as

Outward signs, words, or actions ordained by God, and appointed for this end—to be the ordinary [emphasis in original] channels whereby he might convey to men preventing, justifying, or sanctifying grace.

I use this expression ‘means of grace’, because I know none better, and because it has been generally used in the Christian church for many ages: in particular by our own church [i.e., the Church of England], which directs us to bless God both for the ‘means of grace and hope of glory’; and teaches us that a sacrament is ‘an outward sign of an inward grace [emphasis in original], and a means whereby we receive the same’.⁵

Grace by its very nature is not a reward for human behavior. However, human behavior may be an obstacle to or conducive to grace. By reading and meditating upon Scripture, participating in the sacrament of Holy Communion, praying, coming together in holy conversation with other Christians, and performing acts of mercy and justice we offer ourselves to God in the obedience of faith. The inward disposition of the heart expressed outwardly by our faith-filled participation in these means of grace constitutes an attitude of receptivity toward God. We may experience God in our lives, secondly, as we acknowledge the outworking of the Spirit’s inward presence in our hearts as manifested by the presence of the fruit of the Spirit in our lives, “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Galatians 22-

⁵ Wesley, Sermon 16, “The Means of Grace,” § II.1, in Works, 1:381.

23). Third, we may have an experience of God that is apparently unmediated, an experience that seems to emerge out of our own subjectivity; for example, an overwhelming experience of joy or peace in the midst of a traumatic situation, the sense of an inner voice of guidance or assurance, or an unshakeable sense of having been loved and accepted by God. As was true with Wesley, these sorts of experiences of God provide the raw material on which our reason may work.

Experience is both our practice of the faith and our perception of the ways in which others practice the faith. It enables us to observe both our own faithfulness and the faithfulness of others. Experience also includes our own underlying attitudes as well as our perception of the attitudes of others. An authentic Wesleyan concern for holiness of life does not represent a merely legalistic preoccupation with external behavior. Rather, it represents a life whose outward practices are a visible manifestation of a heart that has been transformed by God's grace. (Transformation will be discussed in more detail in the next section.)

The tendency of some contemporary westerners, including some Christians, to regard personal experience as incontrovertible and self-validating is not consistent with Wesley's understanding of experience. Experience, whether interpersonal or intra-personal, is always subject to interrogation and correction by Scripture, traditions, and reason.

The relocation of the Quadrilateral into the realm of conversation also

impacts our understanding of the role of Scripture in our Wesleyan pedagogy. While an individual's understanding of scriptural primacy, inspiration, and authority may well influence the final outcome of this pedagogy, its implementation as a methodology need not be affected by such differences of opinion.

In this pedagogy a clear distinction is made between Scripture on one hand and its interpretations and methods of interpretation on the other. Anything other than Scripture, including theological statements that attribute a privileged status to Scripture, is an interpretation of Scripture. Such secondary statements have no grounds for claiming unassailability. The weight of their historical precedence is a legitimate consideration, but such weight does not constitute immunity from interrogation. For the sake of this pedagogy, Scripture's uniqueness lies in its historical role as the church's authorized compendium of the origins of the Christian faith. As such, it provides the starting point for the church's 2000 year trajectory of theological reflection. This admittedly broad understanding is intended, positively, to affirm God's ongoing self-revelation by the Spirit's presence and, negatively, to deny the use of Scripture as a Procrustean bed into which all subsequent human experience must be made to fit.

Unlike Wesley, our understanding of traditions is pluralistic, as indicated by our preference for the word "traditions." Our Wesleyan pedagogy reaffirms the role of traditions as essential conversation partners. However, traditions, as

we are using the word, are not limited to the past, much less to Wesley's narrow understanding of supposedly pristine, Eastern, pre-Constantinian Christianity. Our understanding of traditions refers to those conversations, both past and present, that self-consciously engage the theological claims of Christianity. Our conversations with traditions will include not only those voices deemed important by Wesley, but also many other voices not deemed important by Wesley. For example, our conversations with traditions will include many voices both past and present, voices that constitute previously ignored or discounted cultural, gender, and socioeconomic perspectives on and critiques of tradition as understood by Wesley. The voices of these traditions will help open our eyes to assumptions we cannot see because of our inevitable immersion in our own culture. Having had our eyes opened, we are enabled to examine our assumptions from a new point of view.

As with Scripture, traditions, and experience, reason is retained but redefined in our Wesleyan pedagogy. We noted above that Wesley and his contemporaries place a great deal of confidence in the faculty of reason as a tool for validating the truth claims of Scripture and traditions. To repeat Wesley's definition that was quoted above:

In another acceptation of the word, reason is much the same with understanding. It means a faculty of the human soul; that faculty which exerts itself in three ways: by simple apprehension, by judgment, and by discourse. Simple apprehension is barely conceiving a thing in the mind, the first and most simple act of understanding. Judgment is the determining that the things before conceived either agree with or differ from each other. Discourse (strictly speaking) is the motion of the

progress of the mind from one judgment to another. The faculty of the soul which includes these three operations I hear mean by the term reason [emphases Wesley's].⁶

For Wesley reason was second only to Scripture as a criterion invoked to defend the authenticity of a belief or practice of his Methodist movement. When Wesley speaks of Scripture or reason, he does so to affirm that he will abide by either, as in his published Letter to the Author of "The Enthusiasm of Methodists and Papists Compared": "I am not above either reason or Scripture. To either of these I am ready to submit." He even goes so far as to say that if given sufficiently weighty arguments, he will give up Christianity.⁷

However, Wesley's confidence in reason was qualified. While it was of undeniable value in "the affairs of the common life," reason was incapable of producing faith, hope, or the love of neighbor in the scriptural sense of the words. He believed, furthermore, that an individual whose spiritual senses had not been enlivened by the Spirit was blind to spiritual data without which reason could not rightly discern spiritual truths.⁸ Like Wesley, we too share a skepticism toward reason, but our skepticism is based upon grounds that are both similar to and different from Wesley's. We cannot share Wesley's confidence in the

⁶ Wesley, Sermon 70, "The Case of Reason Impartially Considered," § I.2, in Works, 2:590. Emphasis original.

⁷ John Wesley, "A Letter to the Author of The Enthusiasm of Methodists, &c.," in The Appeals to Men of Reason and Religion and Certain Related Open Letters, vol. 11 of The Works of John Wesley, ed. Gerald R. Cragg, Oxford ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 370.

⁸ See above, 65-69.

human ability to reason objectively. We realize to a greater degree than he the extent to which our way of reasoning is conditioned by the culture in which we live. Also, we are cognizant, in a way in which Wesley could not have been, to the fact that the cultural conditioning of reason was also at work in the authors of Scripture. This is one aspect of the inseparability of Scripture and reason. It also provides a rationale for the checks and balances that are inherent in our Wesleyan pedagogy.

As we discussed above, our understanding of traditions is limited to self-consciously Christian reflection. By contrast, reason, as we are using the term, refers specifically to secular testimonies, such as the natural and social sciences, psychology, etc. This understanding enables us to engage Wesley's use of reason as an important tool in what we would call apologetics. The frequency of reason as a topic in Wesley's writings is due in large measure to charges of enthusiasm that were being leveled against him and his movement.⁹ Wesley was sympathetic to much of the Enlightenment spirit. However, his affirmation of the possibility of special revelation ran counter to Enlightenment norms. As a result, he struggled to strike a balance between two extremes, both of which he rejected—anti-rational Christian enthusiasm on one hand and anti-supernatural Enlightenment rationalism on the other. Wesley's use of reason to engage the secular thinkers of his day on behalf of Christian faith provides contemporary Methodist with a precedent from tradition for engaging in

⁹ Jones, Scripture, 67.

interdisciplinary conversations in our day.

Transformational

Our conversation with experience, Scripture, tradition, and reason emphasizes the active engagement of human free will in the task of Christian discernment and discipleship. Transformation reminds us that, while we may, by sheer strength of will, modify our behavior, there is nonetheless, still more to be accomplished. We humans are capable of doing the right things resentfully and angrily. God's desire for us is that we do the right things because we want to please God. Until our desires are conformed to God's desires, true happiness and joy will elude us. It was happiness that eluded Wesley in spite of his rigorous regimen of good works, and it was his experience of happiness, albeit intermittent, that constituted one of the distinguishing features of his post-Aldersgate life. Sanctified living consisted not only in righteous action and orthodox beliefs, but also in transformed desires. To quote again a passage from Wesley's "Means of Grace" sermon that exemplifies this distinction, "some began to mistake the means for the end [emphasis in original] and to place religion rather in doing those outward works than in a heart renewed after the image of God."¹⁰ Wesley understood the ability to transform desires as beyond the capacity of human free will. The transformation of our desires can only be accomplished by a work of God's grace in which "God's love has been poured

¹⁰ Wesley, Sermon 16, "The Means of Grace," § 1.1-2, in Works, 1:378.

into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.”¹¹

The notion of transformation/transfiguration is grounded in Scripture. The apostle Paul speaks of human transformation in Romans 12:2, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed (Greek, μεταμορφουσθε) by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect,” and 2 Corinthians 3:18, “And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed (Greek, μεταμορφουσθε) into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.” In both cases the transliterated Greek verb is a form of the English “metamorphosis.” In both cases the verb is in the passive voice; the grammatical subject (the Roman and Corinthian recipients) is being acted upon from the outside. The implication is that we are changed from the inside out.

Just as we acknowledge the essentiality of the Spirit’s presence at the beginning of our pedagogical process, so we are reminded of the necessity of the Spirit’s presence throughout the process. And so there is a cyclical—or perhaps better, reciprocal—dimension to our pedagogy: needs or issues emerge out of our experience of faith’s presence in or absence from our lives; we invoke the Spirit’s guidance as we bring our experience into conversation with the other three voices of the Quadrilateral; and we conclude by invoking the Spirit’s assistance in transforming the desires of our hearts so that holiness of life might

¹¹ Romans 5:5.

be an authentic expression of holiness of heart.

Accountable Community

The proof of the authentic working of the Holy Spirit in our lives is not established by our words but by our behavior. Among the more noteworthy aspects of Wesley's practical theology is his emphasis on mutual accountability as demonstrated by his insistence on participation in small groups. While the importance of community has been implicit throughout our pedagogy by virtue of our emphasis on conversation, community now becomes explicit. As was discussed above,¹² David Lowes Watson's covenant or accountable discipleship is intended to reestablish this dimension of Wesleyan spirituality. Mutual accountability affirms not only Wesley's emphasis on holiness of life as demonstrated by one's observable behavior, but it also reaffirms the thoroughly communal or conversational nature of an authentically Wesleyan pedagogy.

An Educational Pedagogy in the Wesleyan Tradition

The six characteristics discussed above—primacy of the Spirit, prayerful, practical, conversational, transformational, accountable to community—constitute the basis for our practice of Wesleyan pedagogy. The implementation of the steps that follow will be demonstrated in the four case studies with which this chapter will conclude. The steps that follow are: pray, clarify the issue, converse bi-laterally, converse multilaterally, articulate your best current wisdom, and decide upon a plan of action and accountability.

¹² See above, 113-15.

It is also important to state at the outset that this process will likely not be one of uninterrupted progress to transformation. There will be both progress and regress. For example, the second step, clarification of the issue, will likely require not only prayerful reflection and discussion but also bi-lateral and multi-lateral conversations. Once the issue has been clarified, a return to the conversation stages may well be desirous and necessary.

Pray

In our pedagogy prayer is understood in the sense of the Ignatian Examen. Dr. Patricia Brown identifies two movements in the prayer of examen. The first movement, the examination of consciousness, is a pausing to review both how God has been present and active in our lives and how we have responded to God's presence. The second movement, the examination of conscience, invites God to search our hearts and reveal to us "those areas that need cleansing, holiness, and healing."¹³ Beginning with prayer acknowledges the primacy of the Spirit by the conscious invocation of the Spirit's presence at the outset of the pedagogy. Since our pedagogy may be implemented individually or corporately, our prayer will certainly include asking God to help us set aside pre-conceived agendas, both our own personal agenda as well as any community agendas, that may hinder our ability to listen for God. In those situations where this pedagogy is implemented as a group process, prayers will

¹³ Keith Beasley-Topliffe, ed. The Upper Room Dictionary of Christian Spiritual Formation (Nashville, TN: Upper Rooms Books, 2003), s.v. "Examen," by Patricia D. Brown.

include intercession on behalf of class members, congregation, or whatever group we may be leading. In any case, ongoing prayer for openness and discernment of the Spirit's leading will undergird and permeate the ongoing process. Ideally, the prayer of examen is a regular part of an individual's or community's spiritual life.

Clarify the Issue

As soon as an individual or group becomes consciously aware of a sense of inter- or intra-personal dis-ease, spiritual dis-ease, or intellectual confusion or troubled-ness, the task of clarification begins. Prayer becomes the environment in which we ask God's assistance to help us identify and clarify the root cause of what may feel like an uncontrollable flurry of thoughts and feelings. As was just mentioned, clarification of the issue may require moving to the conversations stages and then returning to prayer and clarification. The goal of the clarification step is to formulate your dilemma in a clear, concise question. The journaling of thoughts and impressions is crucial to this step. Prayerful receptivity permeates and undergirds this step. The sorts of dilemmas requiring a pedagogy for discernment are many and varied. The examples to follow will focus on situations that represent four broad categories: existential, vocational, theological, or ethical.

Converse Bi-laterally

In this step we avail ourselves of available wisdom as represented by our four testimonies of experience, Scripture, traditions, and reason. Initially our

conversations consists of a series of prayerfully attentive bi-lateral dialogues with experience, Scripture, traditions, and reason, in no necessary order. Again, journaling our thoughts and impressions is crucial. Our prayerful conversations with experiences may include both our own past experiences that we deem relevant to our present situation as well as our knowledge of relevant experiences of others. The following questions are relevant in both an individual or group process. Feel free to interchange the "I/my" pronouns to "you/your" or "we/our" as appropriate: Was there a time in my past when I know that I experienced God? What were the constitutive elements of that experience? Were they inter- or intra-personal? What did I feel—joy, peace, and harmony or sadness, dis-ease, and conflict? How did I respond to the situation? Did I feel positive or negative about the eventual outcome? Is there anything from my past experience of God that can help me understand the situation in which I currently find myself? If so, what is it? In retrospect is there something I would or would not do differently, now that a similar situation has arisen? What tentative conclusions emerge from my conversation with experience?

Our bi-lateral conversations with Scripture and a variety of traditions may be considered as written accounts of other people's experiences of God and their reflections on those experiences. Remember, as was mentioned above, that traditions refer to self-consciously Christian voices both past and present, whereas conversations with reason, as used below, refer to non-religious conversations. As such, these conversations and our interrogating questions

parallel our conversations with the experiences of others whom we know. The importance of conversing with points of view outside of our own cannot be understated. Reading, study, prayerful reflection, and journaling will significantly enhance the quality of our separate conversations with these conversation partners.

While it was impossible to exclude reason from any of our previous bilateral conversations, it is important throughout our process to pause periodically and think about the data we are accumulating. At this step Wesley's understanding of reason as a tool for understanding, apprehending, judging, and engaging in discourse are relevant. The voice of reason enables us: (1) to expand our frame of reference as we apply our reason to our examination of testimonies from disparate Christian traditions, (2) to determine whether or not the testimonies or previously unknown traditions merit incorporation into, modification of, or replacement of our own tradition, or (3) to determine congruence or conflict among various testimonies.

Following Wesley, reason is also a principal testimony by which we engage in apologetic conversations with ideas and individuals outside the realm of specifically Christian discourse. Natural science, physics, philosophy, anthropology, sociology, individual and social psychology, educational psychology, ethics, historiography, and non-Christian spiritualities are among the topics whose subject matter intersects with Christian faith and practice in potentially fruitful ways.

Converse Multi-laterally

Reason assumes an even greater role as we step beyond our bi-lateral conversations. After allowing each of the testimonies of the Quadrilateral to have their say, we must next compare content among all four. Imagine, now, that instead of sitting across the table from one person, you are at a large round table with four other people, each of whom converses not only with you but with one another. Your responsibility is to serve as moderator, insuring that all potential intersections of ideas are given their due. You must also determine as best you can if the information you have gathered is compatible, consistent, coherent, or conflicting. Can it be logically integrated and synthesized? Can honest consensus among the testimonies be achieved?

It is conceivable that consensus will not be achieved. If it is not, and if some decision, however tentative, must be made, then the question or questions become: Toward what conclusion does the preponderance of evidence seem to point? Are there reasons to weigh the significance of one testimony over another? Randy Maddox's observation mentioned above, that consistency may have less to do with similar decisions or behaviors than with a consistent orienting concern out of which a decision is made, may be of help. For example, an orienting concern of love for our children recognizes that their individual differences require what might appear to be an inconsistent application of punishments and rewards. Treating them all the same all of the time might be patently unloving!

Articulate Your Best Current Wisdom

If consensus is achieved, develop a clear, simple statement of your conclusion. Then list in bullet form the primary arguments in support of your decision. You may also choose to list options you rejected and list the reasons why they were rejected.

If consensus is not achieved, determine a strategy for prioritizing the top two or three conclusions. If you are part of a group, prioritizing conclusions and all of the following steps will include the group. Develop a clear, simple statement of each of the competing conclusions that can be agreed upon by everyone. Under each statement list the arguments for and against in language that can be supported by everyone. Develop a clear, simple statement that identifies the area or areas of disagreement in language that can be supported by everyone. Work as a group to develop a compromise conclusion that everyone can live with while further study continues.

Action and Accountability

Whether there is consensus or compromise, some form of action is required. For Wesley, growth in grace requires obedience to the grace we have received. His guidelines for reading Scripture that are found in his Preface to his

Explanatory Notes on the Old Testament include the following:

. . . to know the whole will of God, and a fixt resolution to do it? . . . And whatever light you then receive, should be used to the uttermost, and that immediately. Let there be no delay. Whatever you resolve, begin to execute the first moment you can. So shall you find this word to be indeed

the power of God unto present and eternal salvation.¹⁴

To choose inaction when the way forward is unclear is to shut ourselves off from the grace we may need to gain the clarity we desire. Like a small child approaching the closed automatic door into a toy store, a small, tentative step can open up an entire world of unimaginable, previously unforeseen possibilities.

One characteristic of our Wesleyan pedagogy yet to be mentioned in our practice is transformation. As was suggested above,¹⁵ anything short of transformation is incomplete. However, transformation is not a practice to be implemented; it is the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. More than the empowering of our wills, transformation is the changing of our desires to coincide with God's desires, the "mind of Christ" (Philippians 2:5), if you will. In a manner similar to that which was discussed in our consideration of the means of grace and Christian experience,¹⁶ our actions or inactions may hinder the Spirit's transforming work, but they may not manipulate or guarantee it. Transformation is received, not simply learned. Only receptivity and responsiveness to the Spirit's movement within and among participants in this pedagogy will create an environment conducive to the Spirit's transforming work.

¹⁴ John Wesley, "Explanatory Notes on the Old Testament: Preface," Works (Jackson), vol. 14.

¹⁵ See above, 136-37.

¹⁶ See above, 129-30.

A Wesleyan Pedagogy Applied: Four Cases

Before we begin exemplifying our pedagogy by means of four specific cases, let us recapitulate the six-step process we have just completed. First we pray in order to attune ourselves to the Spirit's movement and presence within and among us. Second, sensitive to the guidance of the Spirit, we clarify the issue on the form of a clear, concise question to be answered. Third, we engage in a series of four bi-lateral conversations with our own experience of God, Scripture, traditions, and reason. Fourth, we bring our four conversation partners into multi-lateral conversations with each other. Fifth, we articulate our best current wisdom. Sixth, we formulate a strategy for implementation or action and accountability. Since transformation of our desires, or the mind of Christ, is the final goal of our pedagogy, continual recollection of the Spirit's presence within and among individuals participating is essential so as not inadvertently to hinder the Spirit's transforming work.

The four case studies that follow are intended to illustrate four types of issues or crises that are more-or-less universal to human existence. The first case addresses an existential crisis that threatens one's very sense of God and self, the second a vocational dilemma, the third a theological issue, and the fourth a personal ethical dilemma. The first of the four cases to follow, that of John and Joanne Barker, will go into considerable detail in explaining the implementation of our Wesleyan pedagogy. The final three cases will be less detailed, suggesting only the broad movements of the pedagogy.

An Existential Crisis: John and Joanne Barker

John and Joanne Barker are “fixtures” around the church. They live in a parsonage on the church premises, and their three children know every nook, cranny, and hiding place. John and Joanne are resident custodians, but they are much, much more. They are oblivious to the enormous number of hours they work each week. They make themselves cheerfully available to anyone who needs access to the facility, regardless of the day or hour. They do a lion’s share of the cooking for church meals, and they are usually the ones who mobilize their Sunday school class to respond to the crises of fellow class members. The Barker children have quite literally grown up in the church. Sunday school, UMYF, Boy and Girl Scouts, the church summer volleyball team, Vacation Bible School—you name it and the Barker children were present.

That’s how it used to be. Oh, John and Joanne are still fixtures, but their children are another story. One by one, as the children graduated from high school, their participation in the life of the church became increasingly erratic. Eventually all three of the Barker’s children dropped out of sight. Their only daughter was living on the streets. One son was amiably indifferent to the Christian community. The other son, Mark, their youngest, had become an abuser of alcohol. John and Joanne secretly feared that he had sunk more deeply into the drug culture. Friendly inquiries to John and Joanne about their children were met with expressions of embarrassment and worry.

Very late one Friday night the Barkers’ closest friends, Carl and Melissa

Donaldson, received a call. It was John Barker. Mark had been involved in an automobile accident. A drunk driver had run a red light and slammed into their son's car at high speed. The drunk driver was unhurt. However, Mark, who had just completed his sixtieth day of sobriety, was not expected to live.

When Carl and Melissa arrived at the emergency room waiting area, the expression on the Barkers' faces answered the question they were afraid to ask. Mark son had died. In a shaking voice punctuated by convulsive sobs Joanne asked her friends, "Will I ever see my son again?"

Most of the time we Americans who call ourselves Christian live our lives in the cool, refreshing shallow waters of life. Like the Barkers and the Donaldsons, we are oblivious to the rip-tides that can drag us kicking and screaming into the face of helplessness, hopelessness, and our own fragile mortality. Both the Barkers and the Donaldsons find themselves thrust into a situation both inexplicable and irreversible. For them the biblical doctrine of salvation is no longer merely a subject for abstract theological speculation. The clear-cut, black-and-white certainties of the printed page can seem dingy and gray in a world populated by sinning saints and saintly sinners. Ringing in their ears are the pronouncements of conservative Christian friends in their Sunday school class who always seem eager to pronounce judgment. "After all," they are quick to add, "that's what the Bible says."

Has the Good News become bad news for the Barkers and Donaldsons? Something deep within them rebels against such a thought. Is their yearning

merely self-delusional wishful thinking? Or could it be that their cries, cries that are too deep to put into words, are something other than their own desperate self-talk? Could it be that God's Spirit is calling into question the well-worn, simplistic, uncontested, supposedly Christian truisms that are depriving them of hope? How do they respond to the conflicting voices?

The Barkers' and Donaldsons' pastor, Karen, was with the two couples during the emotional roller coaster of the next few weeks. The Barkers' desolation and sense of total abandonment by God reminded Pastor Karen of the darkness of Good Friday. She shared with the four of them a selection of Psalms of personal lament—Psalms 13, 22, 88, and 130—as a way both to give them words for their own desolation and to bring them into contact with the Bible's realistic appraisal of life's dark moments, even for people of faith.

It wasn't until extended family and friends had returned to their homes and the flurry of paperwork had been completed that the heart-wrenching question of Mark's relationship with God at the time of his death threatened to overwhelm the two couples. Karen sensed that the time had come for her to suggest an intentional plan for the five of them as they walked through this valley of grief and uncertainty together. She proposed weekly gatherings to be augmented as needed by phone calls, emails, or additional get-togethers.

Pastor Karen opened their first evening together with prayer. She asked God to be powerfully present within and among them as they opened their hearts. Grief, anger, regrets, tears, and "what-ifs" spilled into a room filled with

tangible expressions of unconditional love. When the evening was over, everyone was physically and emotionally exhausted, but there was a sense of catharsis and relief. Karen closed their time together with prayer. She thanked God for the gift of Mark's life, for being present with them in their grief, for never forsaking them, and for loving Mark even more than they could imagine. She spoke of Mark as present with them and commended him to God's infinite grace and love. After praying, Karen suggested that the five of them covenant to set aside some time on a daily basis in which they would pray for each other and share with God their feelings about Mark's life and death. Specifically, she encouraged them to remember a time in their lives that they would identify as a sacred moment, a moment when God's unquestioned presence was immediate and powerful, perhaps a moment in which their life intersected with Mark's life in a grace-filled way. She also suggested that they each purchase a journal in which they would record thoughts and memories of Mark that emerged during their prayer times. Her last words before getting into her car were a reminder of the ever-presence of God's comforting Spirit.

Their next gathering began in much the same way as the first one. The Spirit's presence among them was palpable. Pastor Karen suggested that they begin by sharing memories of Mark from their journals. Once again the words and emotions surged into their midst as they smiled and sometimes even laughed through tears as they remembered Mark. At times it almost felt as if Mark were present with them. Once again Karen closed their time together with

prayer. Before they returned to their homes, she suggested that during their daily quiet time they try to put into writing what it was that had been troubling them most since John's death.

Karen spent many hours on the phone during the next week. Joanne Barker was struggling to find words that would enable her to externalize the ache in the pit of her stomach. When the five of them next gathered together they shared their thoughts. Joanne shared with them that during one of her quiet times she remembered, and recorded in writing, her anguished question on the night when she heard of John's death, "Will I ever see my son again?" She realized as soon as she saw it on the paper in front of her that she had given birth to the source of her ache. As the other group members shared their own thoughts, it became apparent to all of them that Joanne's words had encapsulated their own concerns. Before concluding their time together for the evening, Pastor Karen restated to the group her own perception of the core issue that was troubling them: "Is John in heaven?" She asked them to spend some of their quiet time during the next week reflecting upon whether or not that was, in fact, the root of their concerns. After praying together, they went to their homes.

Pastor Karen anticipated that the group would confirm the question with which they closed their last meeting. She prepared for that eventuality by collecting some resources for the group to explore the next time they gathered. When the group did, in fact, agree to pursue the question "Is John in heaven,"

Karen invited them to share anything from their own experiences of God's that they thought might be relevant to their future discussions. She asked their permission to take written notes of the subsequent conversation to share with them via email, and they agreed. Since none of the other four adults had significant knowledge of the Bible, most of their comments were grounded in their own feelings. Karen was quick to affirm the legitimacy of their feelings, even as she emphasized the importance of tapping into other sources of information and insight.

Before the meeting ended, Karen encouraged all of them to continue paying attention to and recording their feeling-level responses to the question. Then she offered a strategy for the group to consider. Now that they had at least begun to get in touch with their own experiences and feelings, she suggested they expand the scope of their investigation. She took out of her three-ring binder five copies of a list of resources that she had prepared and distributed a copy to each of them. The list was divided into two sections, Scripture and traditions. In the Scripture section was a list of Bible references. In the traditions section was a list of books and articles having to do with salvation.

Pastor Karen proposed that they spend as many weeks as it took to read and discuss the resources on the list. She asked that they do their own reading and reflection on the Bible passages and resist the temptation to refer to Bible commentaries and other secondary resources until later. She encouraged them to add to the list any other Bible passages they might encounter that spoke to

the question. She reminded them once again of the value of journaling their thoughts. The Bible passages Karen listed were all from various books within the New Testament. They took turns reading the following passages aloud from the handout Karen provided:

John 3:16-1. (16) "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. (17) "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. (18) Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

John 14:1-6. [Jesus said,] (1) 'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. (2) In my Father's house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? (3) And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. (4) And you know the way to the place where I am going.' (5) Thomas said to him, 'Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?' (6) Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

Romans 5:18-21. (18) Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. (19) For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous. (20) But law came in, with the result that the trespass multiplied; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, (21) so that, just as sin exercised dominion in death, so grace might also exercise dominion through justification leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

1 Corinthians 15:22. (22) for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.

Colossians 1:20. (20) and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

2 Timothy 2:11-13. (11) The saying is sure: If we have died with him, we will also live with him; (12) if we endure, we will also reign with him; if we deny him, he will also deny us; (13) if we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself.

2 Peter 3:9. (9) The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.

After they had read the passages, they concluded their gathering with prayer and parted for the week.

When they reconvened the next week there was an energy level unlike what they had experienced before. Pastor Karen was the last one to arrive, and it was clear that discussion had already begun. No one even noticed her arrival. She just sat back and observed what was happening. When the others became aware of her presence she said, simply, "My! There sure does seem to be a lot to talk about! Where shall we start?" Joanne spoke for all of them, "We had no idea that the Bible offered more than one point of view about salvation." Carl Donaldson jumped into the conversation next, "Everything I've every heard from my conservative friends was pretty cut-and-dried, 'Turn or burn.'" Then it was Melissa's turn, "How can we reconcile these verses with what we've always heard?" Finally John Barker chimed in, "Pastor Karen, what do you think?" Pastor Karen just smiled.

For the next two weeks the five of them discussed the passages, including some that Karen hadn't included, one-by-one until they had nothing more to say. By the time they had finished, dozens of questions had emerged

and remained unanswered. All of the questions had been written down and copies distributed to the group. Pastor Karen said, "I think we are ready to look at what the traditions have to say." She emphasized to the group that no matter what they might think about the Bible's authority or inspiration, there was nothing necessarily inspired or authoritative about any of the perspectives they would encounter among the traditions. They were free to agree or disagree, question or critique, compare or contrast as they saw fit. However, they had to be able to share with the group their reasons for their position.

Pastor Karen brought several books from her personal library, including a variety of commentaries on the various Bible passages they had already explored. She also had a list of relevant books and articles, some of which were accessible online and some of which could be either checked out from a local library or purchased at a local bookstore. All of the books and articles were written by Christian authors, but they represented a variety of perspectives and opinions. The books included David Lowes Watson's, God Does Not Foreclose: The Universal Promise of Salvation;¹⁷ Nicholas Wolterstorff's Lament for a Son;¹⁸ When Life Hurts: Understanding God's Place in Your Pain by Philip Yancey¹⁹;

¹⁷ David Lowes Watson, God Does Not Foreclose: The Universal Promise of Salvation (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1990).

¹⁸ Nicholas Wolterstorff, Lament for a Son (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1987).

¹⁹ Philip Yancey, When Life Hurts: Understanding God's Place in Your Pain (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990).

and The Problem of Pain²⁰ and A Grief Observed²¹ by C. S. Lewis; Five Cries of Grief: One Family's Journey to Healing After the Tragic Death of a Son by Merton P. Strommen²²; J. I. Packer's A Grief Sanctified: Through Sorrow to Eternal Hope²³; and Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World edited by Dennis L. Ockholm and Timothy R. Phillips.²⁴

Pastor Karen also shared a number of articles available online including: "I Am a Convinced Universalist"²⁵ by William Barclay, author of a very popular multi-volume devotional commentary on the New Testament; two articles by Ronald Goetz, former editor-at-large for Christian Century and professor of theology and ethics at Elmhurst College in Elmhurst, Illinois, entitled "Grace Unlimited (Romans 11:32)"²⁶ and "The Apologetics of Universal Grace (Acts

²⁰ C. S. Lewis, The Problem of Pain (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1944).

²¹ C. S. Lewis, A Grief Observed (London: Faber, 1961, reprint, San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989).

²² Merton P. Strommen, Five Cries of Grief: One Family's Journey to Healing after the Tragic Death of a Son (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1996).

²³ J. I. Packer, A Grief Sanctified: Through Sorrow to Eternal Hope (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2002).

²⁴ John Hick, et al., Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World, ed. Dennis L. Ockholm and Timothy R. Phillips (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 1996).

²⁵ William Barclay, "I Am a Convinced Universalist" [text online] (Auburn, AL); available from <http://www.auburn.edu/~allenkc/barclay1.html>.

²⁶ Ronald Goetz, "Grace Unlimited (Romans 11:32)" [text online] (accessed 22 October 2006); available from <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=716>.

17:23b; I Pet.3:18b-19; John 14:17)²⁷; a response to the question “Does The United Methodist Church believe in universal salvation?” found on the official United Methodist website;²⁸ and finally, an article entitled “Universalism, a Problem for Everyone” that exemplifies the position and reasoning of those who oppose a universalist understanding of Christian salvation.²⁹

The group was almost overwhelmed by the potential number and volume of resources available. Karen suggested that they each choose one commentary, one book, and one article apiece. The articles were brief enough to complete in a week, as were the relevant portions of the commentaries. However, such was not the case with the books. The group decided that the books could be kept until finished and then passed to anyone else in the group who might be interested in reading them. Karen also suggested that each person agree to prepare a written summary of their reading to share with the others, so that they all might benefit from each other's reading. The enthusiasm with which they began their meeting was sustained by the prospect of finding answers to

²⁷ Ronald Goetz, “The Apologetics of Universal Grace (Acts 17:23b; I Pet.3:18b-19; John 14:17)” [text online] (accessed 22 October 2006); available from <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=1733>.

²⁸ “Does The United Methodist Church Believe in Universal Salvation?” [text online] (Nashville, TN: United Methodist Communications, accessed 25 October 2006); available from <http://archives.umc.org/interior.asp?ptid=16&mid=9077>.

²⁹ “Universalism, a Problem for Everyone” [text online] (Wahiawa, HI: Let Us Reason Ministries, accessed 25 October 2006); available from <http://www.letusreason.org/Curren31.htm>.

the questions their discussion had generated.

At the end of six weeks everyone had read all of the articles and commentary passages for themselves, all of the books had been read by at least one person, and everyone had a summary of key insights from all of the books. Joanne Barker volunteered to consolidate all of their findings thus far under the title, Is John in Heaven? The group agreed that she would summarize their findings under the following headings—our feelings and experiences, our understandings of relevant Scripture passages, and commentaries and traditions—and email her work to everyone else before their next meeting. They were each to proof-read her summary and be prepared to share additions or corrections at their next gathering.

After opening prayer they continued their next meeting by noting additions and corrections in Joanne's summary. Then they spent the rest of their time reviewing every item in their list to determine whether it supported a "yes" or a "no" answer to the question "Is John in Heaven?" Melissa Donaldson said she would further subdivide each of the three headings of Joanne's summary into a "yes" group and a "no" group and email her work to the others.

They began their next gathering by reviewing Melissa's work and condensing the "yes" and "no" lists by removing or consolidating similar ideas. When they finished this process the "yes" list contained ten statements and the "no" list contained seven statements. Carl Donaldson, a corporate accountant, verbalized a desire to explore a quantitative way of approaching their findings in

addition to the predominantly qualitative approach they had engaged in this far. After some further discussion all five of them agreed to try the following approach. They reduced each of the lists to the five strongest statements. Then they devised a plan for weighing the relative authority of each of the approximately statements. They created a chart with six columns and ten rows. The left-hand column was wide enough to write each of the ten statements under each other, one per row. On top of the remaining five columns to the right of each statement were the headings E, S, T, R, and Ttl, representing experience, Scripture, traditions, reason, and total. Together the Barkers, Donaldsons, and Pastor Karen discussed each statement and decided whether or not it was supported by the witness of experience, Scripture, traditions, or reason. Each statement could receive five possible votes in each category depending of the reasoned opinion of each person. For example, if all five people agreed that 1 Corinthians 15:22, "for as in Adam all died, so all will be made alive in Christ," is a scriptural support for a "yes" answer to their question, "Is John in heaven," a number "5" will be placed in the "S" column to the right of the statement. If, however, only three people agree that tradition supports that interpretation of 1 Corinthians 15:22, then a number "3" will be written in the "T" column to the right of the statement. Suppose, for example, that no one felt that either reason or experience supported the statement of 1 Corinthians 15:22, then a "0" would be placed in the corresponding columns to the right of the statement. When discussion of each statement was completed, the total numerical value in the

row would be written in the far right column. In the case of our example, the total in the far right column would be $E/0+S/5+T/3+E/0 = Ttl/8$. At the end of the exercise, all positive and negative statements would have been assigned a numerical value between zero and twenty.

Next, they would tally the totals for the “yes” and “no” statements. A significant discrepancy between the two totals would suggest a weightier argument by the numerically higher side, while a less significant discrepancy would suggest a less decisive degree of certainty. Everyone in the group would then be invited to write a paragraph identifying their best current opinion on the issue, including supporting arguments for their decision.

In the case of the question, “Is John in heaven,” the numerical conclusions was significantly weighted on the side of a “yes” answer. Carl expressed his gratitude for the group’s willingness to help him see the outcomes of their conversations in a way that was meaningful to him. The other five group members acknowledged that the quantitative approach was interesting but not nearly as decisive as the more qualitative approach. Significantly, the summary statements by the five participants reflected the relative importance of overall impressions. They said relatively little about specific testimonies from experience, Scripture, traditions, or reason. There were three general observations, none of which referred to a specific verse or quote, that appeared in all five statements. First, much more was said about the sense of hope derived from the exercise, especially due to the fact of what they considered to

be significant scriptural warrant for a “yes” answer. Their previous assumption was that there was no scriptural ground for hope. Second, no one felt a strong need to demand absolute certainty as a result of the process. And last, all five persons expressed a renewed sense of confidence and comfort in entrusting John to a God of mercy and love. The grieving process continues, but it may now be said that no one grieves as those who have no hope.

When the project was completed some six months after it had begun, the group agreed that there should be some way of sharing the fruits of their work. To that end they decided: to continue meeting monthly, instead of weekly; to develop a one-day workshop in which they would share both their process and their tentative conclusions with others; and to establish a grief support ministry for other families in their congregation and in the community at large.

To summarize this case in relation to our six-step process, verbal prayer and a prayerful attitude permeated every gathering and every step along the way for this group. The focus question “Is John in heaven?” was clarified through a process of prayerful conversation and self-reflection. Karen facilitated the bi-lateral and multi-lateral conversations by providing probing, self-reflective questions regarding their personal experiences of God, by providing both scriptural and non-scriptural resources from Christian traditions as well as resources from relevant secular sources, by leading in reasoned reflection upon the outcomes of their investigations. Finally, the group formulated their best current wisdom on the question “Is John in heaven?” and developed a clear

strategy for implementation and accountability. A sense of catharsis, in the form of emerging peacefulness, is a manifestation of the Holy Spirit's transforming work. And so we see a dynamic Wesleyan pedagogy at work.

A Vocational Decision: Jim Roberts, Corporate Lawyer

For ten years Jim Rogers has had the job of his dreams. The hours are demanding, but he currently has no "significant other," and the money is great. He has all of the grown-up toys he wants—Italian sports car, SUV, boat, motorcycle. He just started ground school a few weeks ago so he could get a private pilot's license. His seniority in the company allows him four weeks of vacation annually, and he has traveled and cruised the world.

Lately, for reasons he hasn't been able to pinpoint, he has sensed a loss of the zest for living that has always been so important for him. As best as he can remember, the inner twinge began shortly after he returned from a week-long Church mission trip to an impoverished village in Mexico. His thoughts kept returning to the poverty he saw and the enormous good that a relatively small amount of money accomplished, money that he would thoughtlessly spent on a weekend fling. He now realized that he left a little bit of his heart in that village. Maybe more accurately, he now carried a little bit of that village in his heart. One way or the other, he was ambivalent about his work in a way he couldn't have imagined a month ago. He wants to know, "What are my feelings trying to tell me?"

Jim recently completed a daylong workshop at his The United Methodist

Church at which the guest speaker shared an approach to discernment and decision-making that was based on the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. He was impressed with the group process as facilitated by the presenter. When he asked if the approach could be adapted by an individual, the presenter assured him that it could. Jim found the notes from the workshop and listed the six steps: pray, clarify the issue, converse bi-laterally, converse multilaterally, articulate your best current wisdom, and decide upon a plan of action and accountability. And so he began.

Jim prayed that God would still the mental turmoil caused by all of his conflicting internal conversations, so that he could be attuned to the Spirit's voice within. Then he sat in silence, intent on breathing slowly and deeply until he experienced a degree of inner calm. He concluded his prayer time by thanking God for stilling his racing thoughts and asking for attentiveness as he began what he anticipated would be a weeks-long process.

Jim began immediately to try to identify and clarify the issue that was the source of his recent ambivalence toward his work and his general loss of enthusiasm. He knew intuitively that the tension revolved around his experience on the mission trip. Even before he returned home he was overwhelmed by the enormous disparity between his casual disregard for the money he mindlessly spent on himself and the abject poverty which was the norm in the little village he had visited. He was also overwhelmed by the enormous good that could be accomplished with what he considered to be pocket change or mad money.

He soon realized, however, that it wasn't just money. He had been writing generous checks to charitable causes for years. Ashamedly, he had to admit that he prided himself on his generosity. Now there was a new-found appreciation for the villagers as people. Their shared humanity had touch him more deeply that he could have anticipated. His spirit had been enriched by them. His work among them had a sense of significance that he had never known before. He shared his personal struggle with others and found that the process of dialogue helped him begin to clarify the issue with which he was wrestling. He was torn between keeping the job that had lost much of its allure or changing his life's work completely and retraining for a career as a missionary or an international relief worker. His dilemma was one of vocation, and his preliminary conclusion, the best he was able to formulate at the moment, suggested an either/or approach.

Having prayed and achieved some measure of clarity concerning the issue, Jim proceeded through the discernment process by engaging in reading and prayerful reflection with the four conversation partners identified in the workshop he had attended at church—Scripture, traditions, reason, and experience. He enlisted the help of his pastor in identifying accounts of the calls of individuals from Scripture and traditions. Jim chose from his pastor's list Amos the prophet, King David, the apostles Peter and Paul, and Saint Francis of Assisi. Next he began exploring wisdom from outside of the Christian traditions, especially exemplars from his own world, the world of business. He read stories

of the charitable work made possible by the generosity of such industrial giants as the Rockefellers and Carnegies. Recent multi-million dollar gifts to charitable foundations by Bill and Melinda Gates and rock star Bono helped Jim realize that his preliminary either/or mindset was overly simplistic. He began to understand that the choice he was facing could be more nuanced. It wasn't necessarily merely a choice between wealth and self-imposed poverty or a career in business versus a career as a humanitarian in a third world service.

One of the biographies he read referred to a passage in the Bible that identified generosity as a spiritual gift. Such a thing had never occurred to Jim. He backtracked in the process to see what the Bible might have to say about the possibility of a spiritual use of money. Two passages in particular impressed him:

Romans 12:6-8. (6) We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; (7) ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; (8) the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

1 Timothy 6:17-19. (17) As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. (18) They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, (19) thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.

It was as if a light went on for Jim; his choice could be both/and instead of either/or. As Jim begin the next step of the process, conversing multilaterally among the four testimonies, he found himself making connections between Bill

Gates and Bono; Jesus' command to the rich man in Matthew 19:21, "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me"; and St. Francis' decision to sell all he had and live among the poor.

While Jim wasn't sure where this new direction he was embarking upon would ultimately take him, he knew what his next step must be. He sold many of his expensive toys and sought advice from his new-found missionary friends in Mexico as to how he might best support their work with the proceeds. He formulated a plan to simplify his life by downsizing; he sold his McMansion and bought a home that was ample. He sold all of his vehicles but one. He determined to continue pursuing his private pilot's license, because he envisioned the possibility of volunteering his services as a pilot on behalf of the work of some missionary agency.

Jim also decided to look up the email address of the guest presenter who had shared the discernment process at his church. He wanted to relate his personal experience with the Wesleyan discernment process and seek additional suggestions and insight. Finally, Jim volunteered to serve on the Missions Committee at his local church as a way to broaden his knowledge of opportunities in missions and to offer his time and financial resources as a volunteer for future mission trips.

A Theological Question: The Virgin Birth

Andrea has been teaching the Christian Lifers Sunday School Class (they

proudly identify themselves as Lifers) at the Campus Church for 12 years, ever since she was hired to teach New Testament theology at the local seminary. Most of the Lifers are also students at the local liberal arts university that is affiliated with the seminary where she teaches. Both the university and the seminary are now only nominally related to the evangelical denomination that founded them as training institutions for pastors almost a century ago in the turmoil of the liberal-fundamentalist controversies.

Lifers are there for a variety of reasons. A few are seminary students, both married and unmarried, who welcome the weekly opportunity to watch Andrea make the shift from teaching future pastors and scholars during the week to teaching well-educated lay women and men on Sunday. By far the majority of the Lifers are young married couples from the university and the surrounding community who consider Andrea and her husband, Scott, an elementary school teacher, to be friends, models, and mentors in Christian family life. As a matter of fact, most of the Lifers would agree that Andrea and Scott are the glue that holds together their class's enormous political, social, and theological diversity. Differences that would probably separate and fragment the class members during the week dissolve into irrelevance in Andrea's and Scott's presence.

Discussions among the Lifers have become increasingly, and uncommonly, intense these past few weeks. A handful of conservative firebrands from the denomination that founded the university and seminary have been attracting a growing crowd of listeners to their open-air sermons every afternoon

in the university quadrangle. These self-styled street preachers have been denouncing both the university and seminary faculty and students for falling away from the fundamentals of the faith on which the institutions have been built. Belief in the Virgin Birth of Jesus has become the litmus test for Christian orthodoxy, and the Lifers have begun to show signs of schism.

While Andrea and Scott are troubled by the mounting tension, they also agree that this situation is providing them with a profoundly teachable moment for reasons the Lifers don't yet know. Andrea the theologian and Scott the educated layman hold profoundly different views on many issues related to their Christian faith, including the Virgin Birth. Shortly after they began dating, their undeniable love for each other forced them to wrestle with the role that their differing theological beliefs would or should play in their future. Would marrying Andrea mean that Scott, the more conservative of the two, was compromising his faith by yoking himself unequally (to use the language of 2 Corinthians 6:4 from his beloved King James Version of the Bible) to the more liberal Andrea? Would marrying Scott result in Andrea's having to compromise her egalitarian understanding of the husband-wife relationship and abandon her goal of a career in New Testament scholarship? They had succeeded in resolving their dilemma not just successfully but lovingly. The question was, could they marshal their personal experience on behalf of the Lifers?

As Andrea and Scott began actively discussing the need to share their life-experience with the Lifers, several things became apparent. First, they would

need to intensify their prayerful concern for the Lifers, who were much more than members of a class they taught. Andrea and Scott thought of the Lifers as family; they felt more like big brother and sister than teachers. They prayed not only for the class members but also for themselves, as they re-visited some of the most painful moments in their own relationship and reflected upon how best to share some of their very personal, painful feelings with others. They realized from their own experience that trying to force agreement among the Lifers would be counter-productive. They were both convinced that their ability to model their own commitment to mutual respect that was founded on love, and not necessarily on theological agreement, was the most important lesson they could share. To that end, both Andrea and Scott agreed that process was much more important than content.

Andrea shared with Scott an approach to Christian discernment that she had begun using in some of her classes. She explained that it was a conversational approach doing theology that was rooted in the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. She explained that they had intuitively begun implementing the process by praying for themselves and the Lifers and by determining that the real issue was not a matter of whether or not one believed in the Virgin Birth but how Christians modeled a love that transcended theological differences. The next step, she explained, was to guide the Lifers in learning how to pray, both for those with whom they disagreed and for a spirit of openness and discernment. Then she and Scott would guide them in reflecting upon input from a variety of

sources of information including their own personal experiences, Scripture, Christian traditions, and reason. They agreed between themselves that Scott would work on developing learning strategies in the areas of experience and reason. Andrea would do the same for the areas of Scripture and Christian traditions.

Scott proposed that he and Andrea model what it meant to engage the perspectives of experience and reason by spending as many class sessions as necessary sharing their own experience of theological disagreement. They would include in their sharing the process by which they came to agree that living in love was more deeply true than living in agreement. They would also share the importance that 1 Corinthians 13 played for them, both for its emphasis on the supremacy of love and its insistence that human knowledge was incomplete and unclear. They would share from among the many books and articles by secular marriage counselors whose insights and wisdom opened their hearts and minds to new ways of living with disagreements. They would also each share how they came to their different beliefs about the Virgin Birth, and in so doing model two different, legitimate ways of reading Scripture. Lifers were encouraged to raise any questions that come to mind as they arose.

Scott further proposed that between Sundays the class members reflect upon experiences in their weekday lives in which they coexist peacefully and cooperatively with people whose beliefs, opinions, values, and even religions differ from theirs. He encouraged them to locate current self-help books and

articles and see what wisdom they could glean from the expertise of secular writers. Then he asked them to reflect in writing upon what overriding considerations made such joint ventures possible in secular contexts. He planned to have them share their observations in class and then ask them if they could think of any considerations among Christians that might be more important than theological differences. Finally he suggested that the Lifers spend time reflecting upon what they shared in common as compared with what separated them. Scott realized that there was more to be done and that he would have to be prepared to respond to unexpected questions and concerns that were raised by the Lifers. However, he felt that these ideas provided a good start in engaging the voices of experience and reason.

Andrea collected an assortment of biblical texts relevant to their discussions about the Virgin Birth, specifically:

Isaiah 7:14. Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman [translated “virgin” in the King James and New International Versions, among others] is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.

Matthew 1:23. [Referring to Isaiah 7:14] “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.”

Luke 1:30-35. (30) The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. (31) And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. (32) He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. (33) He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” (34) Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” (35) The angel said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High

will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.

In addition, she prepared lessons for the Lifers class that would engage them with various contemporary and historical understandings and interpretations of Isaiah 7:14 as well as the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke. Andrea explained to them the parallels between the accounts of Jesus' birth and some of the accounts of what she called "special births" in the Old Testament. She drew their attention especially to 1 Samuel 1:1-2:11. Not only does the passage recount the special birth of Samuel, but it also includes Hannah's song, which contains striking parallels to Mary's Magnificat in Matthew's Gospel. Andrea challenged them to find passages in the writings of the apostle Paul that insisted on belief in the Virgin Birth as a necessary prerequisite for Christian orthodoxy. Then she assembled a collection of references from the Sermon on the Mount in which Jesus seems to emphasize the priority of living by Kingdom values over verbal profession.

For those who were interested in reading more deeply Andrea offered copies of two chapters from a book entitled The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions,³⁰ co-authored by Marcus J. Borg and N. T. Wright. The authors were close personal friends who, like Andrea and Scott, held very different understandings of the biblical accounts of Jesus. Borg's position coincided with Andrea's and Wright's corresponded with Scott's. Part six of the book, entitled

³⁰ Marcus J. Borg and N.T. Wright, The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1999).

"The Birth of Jesus," consists of a chapter written by each author. Wright's chapter is entitled "Born of a Virgin?" and Borg's chapter is entitled "The Meaning of the Virgin Birth."

The Lifers spent many weeks sharing, reading, comparing and contrasting the information they had collected from all of their sources. Andrea and Scott suggested that they synthesize what they learned in this module by formulating a personal statement that reflected their best current understanding of their own personal understanding of the doctrine of the Virgin Birth and its importance for Christian discipleship. They were to incorporate the new vocabulary they had acquired. Then they would share their statement with the group. Next, they would work as a group to articulate a consensus statement about the Virgin Birth on which everyone could agree. She reminded them that they may come to consensus on the fact that they were unable to arrive at consensus! Following the consensus statement, they were to list those issues upon which they disagreed and articulate the reasons for disagreement.

As a plan of action the Lifers decided to share with the congregation the process they had completed and their varied outcomes. They also committed to writing an open letter to the university and seminary newspapers in which they would identify themselves as committed Christians for whom their relationships with one another and with Christ were a deeper expression of truth than their disagreement over the interpretation of a Christian doctrine that was mentioned two or three times at most in the entire Bible.

An Ethical Decision: Pre-marital Sex

Britney is president of her high school senior class, honor society member, and captain of the girls basketball team. She has been dating Chad, a three-sport letterman and honor society member. They are inseparable and have become an "item." They attend the same church and are active in the senior high youth group. Britney's and Chad's parents are good friends and are delighted by their children's blossoming relationship. The four parents talk among themselves about how wonderful it would be if one day they shared grandchildren! What the parents don't know is that Chad is threatening to break up with Britney if she doesn't have sex with him. Britney thinks she and Chad are meant for each other. She cares deeply for him and doesn't want to lose him, but she has serious reservations about having sex before marriage. She also feels uncomfortable about what feels like an ultimatum from Chad. He has never spoken to her that way, and she is uncomfortable with the change. Of the many questions swirling in her head, an important one has to do with her Christian faith: "Does the Bible forbid premarital sexual relations, no matter what the circumstances?"

Britney has grown up attending a progressive mainline church, and her mother and father consider themselves to be enlightened parents. When she was in sixth grade, she and her parents attended their first denominationally sponsored classes in human sexuality for Christian youth. She and her parents began the process of learning to talk openly about sexuality that weekend. They

have attended two subsequent workshops for older teens since then, the last of which was not quite a year ago. She and her parents shared in a class about sexually transmitted diseases and birth control. They discussed openly the life-changing consequences of an unplanned pregnancy and the physical and psychological risks associated with the termination of a pregnancy. All in all, Britney was the poster child of a well-informed teenage girl who was blessed with enlightened, loving, understanding, supportive, Christian parents.

Britney never thought that she would be facing this dilemma, let alone feel isolated in the midst of it. She never imagined that Chad would put this sort of pressure on her, and it had never occurred to her that she would be reluctant to talk with her parents. However, she is afraid that if she tells her parents about her conflict with Chad, it might jeopardize the long-time friendship between their parents. She also never imagined that she would even entertain the possibility of having sex before marriage, though she knew many of her friends were sexually active. She thought she was unalterably opposed to pre-marital sex, but that was before she started dating Chad. She still didn't want to have sex, but she also didn't want to lose Chad. She was a jumble of conflicting feelings.

Britney was fortunate to have another resource, George Martin, her youth pastor. George and his wife Beth were confidants to many of the youth, including Britney. George encouraged the youth to come to him if they were having a problem they couldn't share with their parents. He was quick to remind them that if they said anything about behavior concerning harm to themselves or anyone

else, he would have to pass that information along to parents or the proper authorities. Invariably George used his confidential conversations with the youth to encourage them to bring their parents into the conversation and to assist in that process. Youth and parents alike trusted Pastor George and Beth.

Britney decided that she needed to talk with Pastor George and Beth about her dilemma with Chad, so she arranged to meet them at their home after school. As always, Britney was very comfortable sharing her dilemma with the couple, and as always, Beth and George were attentive listeners. They did all of the right things: they periodically asked Britney for clarification, they restated what they thought they heard Britney saying, and they were nonjudgmental.

When the three of them felt as though all that needed to be said had been said, Beth asked Britney, "Can you formulate a clear, concise question that focuses your concern right now?" After allowing time for Britney to ponder an answer, she responded quietly but firmly, "Should I have sex with Chad?" Both Beth and George were comfortable that Britney had put her finger on the presenting question.

George and Beth had talked with the youth about the importance of listening for the inner voice of God and had led them in shared experiences of centering prayer. After briefly recapping what centering prayer was about, Beth asked Britney if she would be willing to share in a time of centering prayer with her and George. Britney was genuinely pleased for the opportunity to set aside all of her conflicting feelings. Together they prayer that Britney would be able to

get in touch with the voice of God's Spirit within her. Beth asked Britney to say a quiet "Amen" when she felt she was ready to conclude their prayer time, then they entered into a time of silence.

The silent prayer that followed was deep and meaningful. Britney breathed a quiet "Amen," and slowly the three of them re-gathered their thoughts and feelings to the space in which they were sitting. Beth asked quietly, "Britney, is there anything you would like to ask or share?" After a thoughtful silence Britney responded, "Yes, there is. I can't . . . I mean, I am unwilling to have sex with Chad." Beth continued, "Are you willing to share with us how or why you came to that conclusion?" Britney told them of an inner, unspoken voice. She knew that the voice was the Spirit within her, and she knew that to deny that voice would be to deny her deepest truth. After restating and clarifying Britney's decision, George asked, "Is that the answer to your question?" Britney was sure it was.

George asked, "Now what?" Britney wasn't sure what he meant. George went on, "What about you and Chad?" In her relief at having resolved the question about having sex, Britney forgot about Chad's ultimatum. "I guess I have another problem to resolve," she whispered. "I have to figure out how to tell Chad."

In this case study, George and Beth led Britney through prayer and clarification. They engaged Britney in a bi-lateral conversation with her own experience by means of centering prayer. Britney was able to resolve her

presenting question at this point because she got in touch with her own inner truth. Under different circumstances, George and Beth could have led her further into the process. The three of them have now clarified the new issue and are prepared to resume conversations with experience, Scripture, traditions, and reason in light of the new question, "How do I tell Chad of my decision?"

George and Beth suggest to Britney that Chad may become pushy for a decision. They help her develop a delaying response that will give her the time she needs to formulate her response. During subsequent discussions, George and Beth help Britney see that the issue she is dealing with is at least two-dimensional. There is the presenting issue of having sex, but there is also the equally important issue of Chad's ultimatum and the bullying it represents. Then they guide Britney into Scripture passages that enable her support her reasons for not having sex as well as passages that discuss the characteristics of authentic agape love; i.e., 1 Corinthians 13. Now that she has experienced the inner wisdom of the Spirit within her, they also urge her to continue a regular practice of centering prayer followed by journaling insights gained. They also recommend various Christian devotional commentaries on 1 Corinthians 13, books and articles by Christian authors of sex and dating, and secular self-help books for youth having to do with abusive dating relationships. They discuss the wisdom of these various sources, and even engage in role playing with Britney to help her find her own voice and articulate her best current wisdom. When finally Britney shares her decision with Chad, she is pleased with the newfound

courage and strength of conviction she displays, even though Chad does, in fact tell her that their relationship is over. George and Beth continue meeting with Britney to help her through her breakup with Chad, and the three of them pray that Chad will come to George and Beth for advice.

CHAPTER 8

Conclusion

This dissertation has argued that relocating discussions regarding the Wesleyan Quadrilateral from the realms of Wesleyan history and theology to the realms of religious education and faith formation reveals an authentically Wesleyan pedagogy that is intrinsic to a conversational (as opposed to a geometrical) understanding of the Quadrilateral. We began by summarizing the history of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral and the theological debate it has ignited in the areas of Wesleyan history and theology.

The Quadrilateral's story began with the merger of The Methodist Church and The Evangelical United Brethren Church in 1968 and the decision of that Uniting Conference to form The Theological Study Commission on Doctrine and Doctrinal Standards. An interim report of that Study Commission issued in 1970 contained the seemingly inconsequential phrase "quadrilateral of standards."¹ Albert Outler, the chair of the Study Commission and principal author of its interim report, later joined the words "quadrilateral" and "Wesleyan." Though the phrase Wesleyan Quadrilateral has never appeared in a United Methodist Book of Discipline, both the phrase and the methodological construct it represents are securely established in United Methodist culture.

Subsequent debate over the Wesleyan Quadrilateral has focused on

¹ UMC, Interim Report, 9.

three principal areas: the historical accuracy of the word “Wesleyan” in relation to a quadrilateral of standards, the degree to which contemporary understandings of Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience correspond with Wesley’s use of the terms, and the nature of the interrelationships among the four standards—especially as touching the issue of the primacy of Scripture.

The primary relocation of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral undertaken by this dissertation—from the realms of Wesleyan history and theology to the realms of Christian education and faith formation—has been accompanied by a second relocation of the quadrilateral metaphor—from the realm of geometry to the realm of conversation. This relocation of the metaphor has resulted in a conversational approach to the four testimonies that comprise the Quadrilateral that is analogous to Wesley’s understanding of Christian conferencing. Unlike a geometrical understanding, which suggests clear-cut, mutually-exclusive, quantitatively measurable distinctions between the various quadrants, our conversational understanding suggests an ebb and flow of interactivity characteristic of authentic conversation.

This dissertation also reaffirms the point made by Wesley himself in his sermon Means of Grace: All four testimonies of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral are pen-ultimate to the primacy of the Holy Spirit, without whom the four testimonies possess neither authority, agency, or efficacy. As we quoted earlier from his Means of Grace sermon,

We allow likewise that all outward means whatever, if separate from the

Spirit of God, cannot profit at all, cannot conduce in any degree either to the knowledge or love of God. . . . all outward things, unless he work in them and by them, are mere weak and beggarly elements. Whosoever therefore imagines there is any intrinsic power [emphasis in original] in any means whatsoever does greatly err, not knowing the Scriptures, neither the power of God. We know that there is no inherent power in the words that are spoken in prayer, in the letter of Scripture read, the sound thereof heard, or the bread and wine received in the Lord's Supper; but that it is God alone who is the giver of every good gift, the author [emphasis mine] of all grace; that the whole power is of him, whereby through any of these there is any blessing conveyed to our souls.²

Our relocating of the Quadrilateral and our conversational understanding of its four witnesses revealed the presence of the following intrinsic characteristics: the primacy of the Spirit, prayerful, practical (in a Wesleyan sense), conversational, transformational, and accountable to a community. From these foundational characteristics we derive the following specific steps that comprise our pedagogy: (1) pray, (2) clarify the issue, (3) converse bi-laterally, (4) converse multilaterally, (5) articulate your best current wisdom, and (6) decide upon a plan of action and accountability. The six steps are not strictly chronological, nor is there necessarily a clear ending-point, since accountability would serve begin the process one again.

We conclude with four case studies that are intended to be representative of four typical situations or crises in which our proposed pedagogy might be put into practice: an existential crisis in which life's very meaning and purpose comes under assault, a vocational dilemma, a theological question, and an ethical dilemma. The goal of this pedagogy is situation appropriate growth in

² Wesley, Sermon 16, "The Means of Grace," § II.3, in Works, 1:382.

repentance, faith, and holiness, what Wesley referred to as “our main doctrines.”³

The Wesleyan Quadrilateral and the love-hate relationships that accompany it are, in all likelihood, here to stay. Ted Campbell’s assessment—“The very fact that it has provoked serious debate among Methodists on a central theological issue is convincing evidence of its service”⁴—is, I think, both fair and accurate.

³ Wesley, “The Principles of a Methodist Farther Explained” (1746), in The Methodist Societies: History, Nature, and Design, vol. 9 of The Works of John Wesley, ed. Rupert E. Davies, Bicentennial ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989), 227.

⁴ Campbell, “Wesleyan Quadrilateral,” 154.

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